

How to Raise a People Person

It's a digital world, but your child still needs to master IRL skills like making small talk and looking someone in the eye.

by VICKI GLEMBOCKI photographs by ERIN PATRICE O'BRIEN

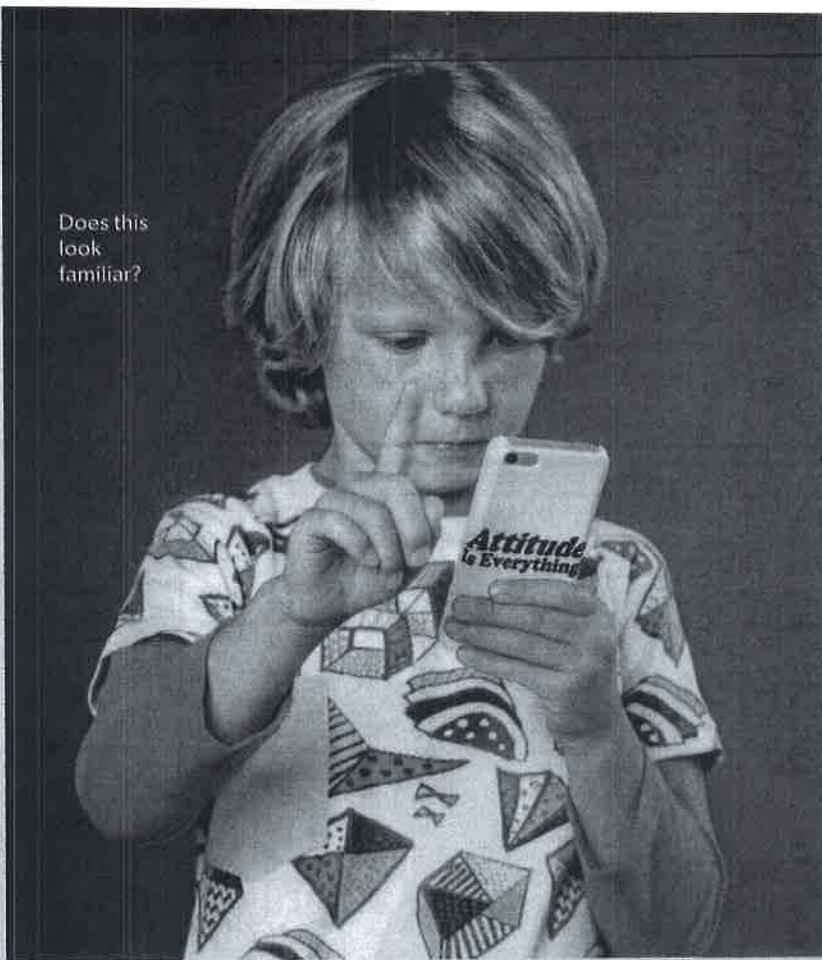
Last month, I watched a 7-year-old boy at his grandfather's birthday party ignore his aunts' and uncles' attempts to talk to him because he was staring, Walking Dead-like, into a mobile device. I can't remember the last time I was in a restaurant and didn't spot kids at a nearby table (and occasionally my own girls, who are 8 and 6) spending the entire meal playing Minecraft or Temple Run on a smartphone. But even that pales in comparison to when my 18-year-old niece came to visit recently and I caught a glimpse of what my life might look like in 2025. It wasn't a pretty sight: I eventually had to declare a "no texting at the table" rule after she put her phone next to her plate and monitored it constantly. Once, she held up her finger while I was asking a question so she could finish typing, never once looking up from the device.

To her, the behavior wasn't antisocial; it was normal. And maybe, now, it is. "Young people spend so much time on devices that they aren't learning basic human-contact skills," says Gary W. Small, M.D., professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA. While third grade seems

to be the tipping point for when kids go tech-crazy, younger ones are all over it too. Preschoolers spend 4.6 hours per day using screen media, according to data from the Nielsen Company. A study released by Common Sense Media found that 39 percent of 2- to 4-year-olds and 10 percent of babies and 1-year-olds use a smartphone, MP3, or tablet. (Full disclosure: When I pull out my iPhone, my 2-year-old immediately reaches for it, yelling, "Game! Game!")

Certainly, there are numerous upsides to electronics. Many children forge friendships while playing interactive games. Shy children may find it easier to text acquaintances than to talk on the phone. And no one can argue the value of a grandmother who lives 1,000 miles away being able to read her grandchild a bedtime story using FaceTime or Skype. Still, the irony is undeniable. "These children will be the most connected generation in history, but they may not know how to talk to someone standing right next to them," says Catherine Steiner-Adair, Ed.D., a clinical psychologist and coauthor of *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*.

Does this look familiar?



Dr. Small has observed that many young kids struggle with basic communication skills we take for granted, such as making eye contact and having a face-to-face chat with friends. With so much tech time, they also have far fewer opportunities to learn how to pick up on people's body language and tone of voice.

Ultimately, children who are comfortable answering the phone and talking to acquaintances at a party may be the ones who have a leg up when approaching a teacher, collaborating with a science partner, and impressing a job recruiter. "These are learnable skills," says Faye de Muysshondt, author of *socialsklz:-) for Success: How to Give Children the Skills They Need to Thrive in the Modern World*. "But kids won't pick them up automatically anymore." As with many things, the lessons should start at home.

Look in the mirror

It's easy to blame children for their digital addiction. But parents are the primary source of the problem, claims

Cris Rowan, a pediatric occupational therapist in Sechelt, British Columbia, who runs Zone'in workshops that teach over-teched families how to reconnect. Thirty-nine percent of adults spend more than 11 hours outside of work using electronic media each day, according to a Northwestern University study. (Note: If you play Candy Crush while watching TV, it counts double.) More than a third of millennial moms say family members are permitted to bring electronic devices to the table during mealtime, and about one third admit that they text their partner more regularly than they speak in person, according to a Parents MomTrak survey.

Children learn how to interact by watching their mom and dad. If they see you using a tablet at the dinner table or diving into your pocket to read a text while talking with a neighbor, they figure that interactions with electronics are just as important—if not more so—than those with people. To model proper social skills, try leaving your smartphone in another

room when they're around, avoid using the TV for background noise, and wait to check your e-mail until after they go to bed. Rowan also suggests setting limits for device use: Everyone must unplug for at least an hour a day (good times are during dinner preparation, eating, and cleanup); one day per week; and one week per year (such as while on a family holiday).

Have a staring contest

See how long you can maintain eye contact with a family member. This exercise gets kids comfortable with looking at another person for a long time. Plus, they love it. "Making eye contact is challenging for many children," says de Muysshondt. Yet it's how they learn to express feelings and read other people's emotions. In her workshops, de Muysshondt has students ask her a question. The first time she responds, she does so while looking at the floor. The next time, she looks directly at them. "When I ask which one they like better, they all vote for the eye contact," she says.

Tune in to body language

Help your child learn to recognize nonverbal cues. For instance, when he's watching TV you might try turning down the volume and asking him to describe what the characters are feeling. If he says, "SpongeBob looks scared," ask, "Why do you think he looks scared?" If he has trouble explaining, give him hints ("Is it because his eyes are open wide and his hands are shaking?"). Helping your child interpret other people's gestures gives him a blueprint for doing it himself, de Muysshondt says.

Next, have him work on his own body language and mannerisms. Start with the basics, such as how to enter a room. Go outside, ring the doorbell, and enter your house slouching and staring at the floor. Then do it again with your chin up, shoulders back, hands at your sides, smiling. Ask him

which one looks friendlier and more confident. See whether he can copy your second approach.

Eat meals together

Kids often expect communication to be techlike—fast and brief. But real conversation is about slowing down the pace, hearing what the other person has to say, thinking about it, and then responding. There's no better place to practice these skills than at the dinner table. After you sit down, everyone can take turns sharing one good thing about their day or ask for help solving a problem that came up. "Learning to be curious, listen actively, empathize, and offer thoughtful advice are critical tools for communication," says Dr. Steiner-Adair.

At my house we get the conversation going by using a "talking stick" (well, it's actually a Barbie microphone that no longer works, but you get the idea). The person holding it asks someone else a question ("Dad, if you could be an animal, what would you be?"). Then

she passes it to that person, who has the floor. For a more robust exchange, no one-word answers are permitted.

Let her speak for herself

Your child needs an opportunity to practice her social skills. Too often, we act as our kids' spokesperson. We call other moms to set up playdates, order meals for them at restaurants, ask the librarian where to find the book they want to read. Why? Because it's faster. Instead, slow down and let your kid handle some of these interactions.

If she feels nervous talking to strangers, set up mini steps to build her confidence. Start out by asking her to say "Excuse me" to the clerk in the toy store, and then you can follow up by asking where the board games are. Have your child work up to handling the entire interaction on her own. When she wants to ask a neighborhood friend to go to the playground, knock on the front door together. Coach her to make the request ("Hi. Can Maddie come out to play?").

A preschooler (or a kindergartner who's shy) may not be ready for this step. If that's the case, work on your child's social skills at home by having her host a mock get-together. Come up with a script for inviting a friend over. When the pretend guest arrives, let her answer the door ("Hi, Jane, come on in!"), introduce her pal to the family ("You remember my mom, right?"), offer her a refreshment ("Would you like some lemonade?"), ask what she'd like to do, and so forth. "If you develop these skills when your child is young, they'll become second nature to her," de Muysshondt says. And who knows? Your child might stop asking to borrow your phone the next time you eat out and—surprise!—ask about your day.

get more!

Watch our exclusive video on how to teach your child to speak clearly and politely on the phone. See it at parents.com/phone-manners.



The Skills Every Child Needs

Faye de Muysshondt, who teaches young kids the basics of social interaction, offers this step-by-step cheat sheet.

Shaking hands

1. Stand up straight. Make eye contact.
2. Extend your right hand—your thumb pointing up, other fingers together—across your body toward the person's right hand, keeping an arm's-length distance.
3. Connect hands so that the web of skin between your thumb and forefinger touches theirs.
4. Shake up and down three times, keeping your elbow next to your body.
5. Let go. Smile.

Making a phone call

1. Dial the number.
2. When the person picks up, identify who you are and ask to speak to the friend: "Hi, this is Laura Drake. May I please speak to Nellie?"

3. If she's not available, don't hang up the phone. Say, "Would you please ask her to call me when she's free?" When you're done, say, "Thanks. Bye."
4. If she is available, have a chat. Be sure to end the call politely: "I'll talk to you later, Nellie. Bye."

Starting a conversation

1. Look the person in the eye, making sure your body is turned toward him.
2. If you haven't met before, ask, "How are you?" "What school do you go to?" "Do you play sports?" or "Do you have pets?"
3. If you know him, greet him by name with a question ("What did you do this weekend, Spencer?").
4. To keep the chat going, respond with more than one word and ask another question in response to his reply.