

GRACE AND COURTESY IN THE ELEMENTARY COMMUNITY

by Elise Huneke-Stone

Don't be fooled by Elise Huneke-Stone's disarming beginning where she implies that grace and courtesy is not normally associated with the elementary. She goes on to elaborate that grace and courtesy is indeed everywhere: in project-based learning, understanding of moral precepts, social and intellectual independence, in the utilization of empathy, used in the unfolding of the reasoning mind and imagination, and in matters of justice and fairness. Integral to the gregariousness and the rules of group work, the elementary child needs grace and courtesy to manage their strong social orientation as children of the second plane.

Grace and courtesy in the elementary: How many of you came to this presentation just to see if such a thing existed? How does the refinement of grace and courtesy survive into "the age of rudeness," you might wonder?

We don't talk much about grace and courtesy in the elementary the way that we talk about grace and courtesy in the primary. Instead, we talk about freedom and responsibility, we talk about moral development, and we talk about how it's the children's work—the children's work, mind you—to form a practice society.

About elementary children, Dr. Montessori wrote,

As moral activity develops, he [the child] wants to use his own judgment, which often will be quite different from that

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of his teachers. There is nothing more difficult than to teach moral values to a child of this age; he gives an immediate retort to everything that we say, having become a rebel... An inner change has taken place, but nature is quite logical in arousing now in the child not only a hunger for knowledge and understanding, but a claim to mental independence, a desire to distinguish good from evil by his own powers, and to resent limitation by arbitrary authority. In the field of morality, the child now stands in need of his own inner light. (*To Educate the Human Potential* 4)

I want to be very clear that when I'm talking about grace and courtesy for the children in elementary, I'm not talking only about the lessons you give. Yes, we can give grace and courtesy lessons in elementary (more about that later). But our lessons are just the first period. The children need to have many opportunities to use the keys we offer in our grace and courtesy lessons, and for that they need their practice society. I don't think that moral development or character or grace or courtesy is something we can instruct. And Montessori was very clear about this, too. She also wrote,

It is up to the teacher to see to it that the moral teachings of life emerge from social experiences. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 13)

In other words, it is the adult's responsibility to make sure the elementary children have the opportunity to form a *practice society*, and then we need to support that formation. We can't do this work for them, and when we try, we deprive them of the very thing that they are driven to do for themselves. It is just as thwarting for adults to restrict the elementary children's social and intellectual independence as it is for adults to confine a two-year-old to a playpen. It's just that elementary children are sometimes a little more polite about it than two-year-olds are. Let's take a look at these two words: *practice society*.

Practice means the children are engaging in something that they haven't already mastered, that they're going to need to work at, and improve, and make an intentional effort towards. And this means there are going to be mistakes, social mistakes. There is going to be some conflict and some hurt feelings. Sometimes people will cry (and that one sensitive little boy will cry almost every day for several years). This does not necessarily mean that your classroom is not working! It could mean that your classroom is full of passionately engaged children who care about their work.



Class courtroom

Society is a word that comes from the Latin root for *companion*, and it means a friendly association with others. And it also has a practical connotation: It suggests that the association is a positive, productive one. Work gets done. Certainly it's an expectation of the parents of your students, that this practice society will be one in which a lot of work gets done.

So this is what they're supposed to need to do in elementary, according to Montessori. They've built up a functional independence in the first plane of development, and now in the second plane of development, they're building a cognitive and social independence. So "Help me to do it for myself," becomes "Help me to think for myself," and ultimately it becomes, "Help us to do it for ourselves," and "Help us to think for ourselves."

So, what are these elementary children going to be thinking about? What will they be exploring and learning as they endeavor to build this practice society? It's the role of the adult in a Montessori classroom to support natural development, so it's our adult responsibility to learn as much as we can about how the children develop, so that we can recognize and remove obstacles to that development. My quest to learn more about the practice society of elementary children took me in many directions, and I'd like to share with you some places where I've found insights that have helped me.

Not for the first time, I was inspired by Edward O. Wilson, in his most recent book, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (2013). He is a great

biologist and social scientist who further endeared himself to me when, on his last great entomological adventure in Mozambique, he invited the elementary children in this remote area to help him collect specimens, because six- to twelve-year-olds know the best places to find insects (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/e-o-wilsons-theory-of-everything/308686/>). He is definitely someone who understands elementary children and the way that they explore and collect and examine and classify!

According to E.O. Wilson, we humans are *eusocial*, like the ants and termites, which means that we form intergenerational groups with a tendency toward altruistic behavior as part of our division of labor. Yet unlike the eusocial insects, we form “flexible alliances” and “bonding based on cooperation.”

That certainly sounds like what we hope for in our communities!

E.O. Wilson also talks about how very much we need to reconcile one of the central conflicts of humanity: How do I balance my needs and desires with the needs and desires of the group? And this is it in a nutshell: Our elementary children, from ages six to twelve, have this little stable plane in their development in which they work out this huge human challenge. But they can’t learn how to do it for themselves if it’s being managed for them.

So from E.O. Wilson, we can take the insight that to work together in a flexible, cooperative group for the benefit of all is our biological heritage, and so it follows that our children need lots of experience doing this so that they can master it.

I found more inspiration in this quote:

Just imagine what things would look like if we were taught about this in school and we understood that altruistic helping is just as natural as being selfish. The strange stigma associated with altruistic behavior would be lifted, perhaps engendering far more pro-social behavior. (Lieberman)

Just imagine what things would look like if we were taught about this in school. I know of someone who did imagine, and she too wrote a book about her hopes for humanity: *Education and Peace*.

In his book, Matthew Lieberman talks about what he calls *the mentalizing system*. The mentalizing system is the network of brain structures and processes that are devoted to paying attention to other people. It's also known as the *default system*, because it's where the brain automatically goes when it isn't being asked to do something else, like solve a math problem or recall a particular word. The mentalizing system is the home of the theory of mind, of empathy, of all things social, and it's extremely active. The mentalizing system has been detected in week-old infants (who obviously don't have many autobiographical memories to ruminate on) and in volunteers who are given an eight second pause between other kinds of cognitive problem-solving tasks. We are hard-wired to be social.

So Matthew Lieberman defines the mentalizing system for us and describes how neuroscientists know it exists, and then he shares his collection of research and speculation about the mentalizing system with which we're hard-wired. Some research that connects profoundly to our understanding of grace and courtesy for elementary children tells us this: Social pain is experienced in the same neural networks as physical pain. Now, we've known for a long time that our emotional and social health can have a powerful effect on our physical health, but thanks to the brain imaging capacities we have developed in the last decade, we can now see that our negative social emotions—shame, embarrassment, guilt, heartbreak, loneliness—literally travel along the same neural pathways that conduct our experience of physical pain. And so we seek to avoid social pain in a way similar to our avoidance of physical pain. That our physical well-being is informed by our social experiences is more evidence that we are a eusocial species; it's not a stretch to recognize that our survival as a species must have depended on a social skill set that had to be learned in childhood.

Lieberman goes on to identify three powers of the social brain-connection, mindreading, and harmonizing—all of which loosely correspond to the way we talk about social development in the first three planes of life. It's the first social task of the infant and young child to bond with others. Humans have a special capacity for *connection*. In the elementary, we talk about one aspect of connection as “a special kind of love.” And one result of this capacity

for connection is that our brains are designed to feel social pain very acutely.

Humans also have a special capacity for what Lieberman calls *mindreading*, or paying attention to and figuring out what other people are thinking and feeling. (I love that he uses a literacy metaphor for a social skill!) Mindreading is about observation of others, inferences about what they are thinking or feeling, predictions about what they might do, mapping of the perceptions of others to the memories of one's own experiences; a whole lot of cognitive activity is going on in this everyday act. Mindreading is the basis of empathy, and the basis of an understanding of audience. Although Lieberman puts the onset of the capacity for mindreading at around age four, my understanding of elementary children suggests to me that this particular capacity is in full swing during the elementary years and is made possible by the cognitive powers of imagination and reason that are so strong at this age and also made urgent by their gregarious nature.

Finally, Lieberman writes that humans have a special capacity for harmonizing. Harmonizing in music is when different sounds are in balance with each other. Harmonizing in a culture is when we are adapted to live together, when we are able to express ourselves and share the story of our

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past, present, and future in our unique individual voices, the voice that we have created through the planes of body, mind, and spirit. Harmonizing is when we are able to fulfill our individual needs and the needs of the group in a balanced way. Lieberman suggests that the capacity for harmonizing develops during adolescence and his definition of the socially mature individual is one who can connect, mindread, and harmonize with others.

So what does all of this have to do with grace and courtesy for elementary children? Let's look at these connected, mindreading six- to twelve-year-olds and what they're attempting socially so that we can prepare an appropriate environment for them. We must

observe them effectively and guide them so that we can remove the obstacles to their social development in the same way that we do for their intellectual development. We can isolate the necessary keys in our grace and courtesy lessons that will enable them to build a positive social independence.

What do we know about elementary children? Their characteristics will guide us in knowing how to support grace and courtesy for them, just the same way that their characteristics guide us in knowing how to present geometry or grammar or any other component of Cosmic Education.

We recognize that elementary children have the following characteristics:

- Reasoning minds
- Powerful imaginations; they are imaginative explorers
- Gregariousness; they are attracted to group work; the peer group is important
- Focus on cognitive order rather than physical order
- Hero worship
- Strong interest in fairness, justice, rules, morality
- Desire to move beyond the limits of the classroom

Let's take a look at each of these characteristics in turn, and some examples of the kinds of grace and courtesy opportunities that arise out of the experiences of practice society that elementary children have in your classrooms.

The Reasoning Mind

Consider how we offer grace and courtesy to the children of the first plane of development, to the absorbent mind. First of all, there is a long period of indirect preparation; the young child observes and absorbs the modeling (intentional or not) available in the social interactions around him or her. Then when we give a grace and

courtesy lesson in the Children's House, the adult makes use of the absorbent mind: "Here is what you do when you blow your nose/invite a friend to snack/need my attention."

This needs to change for the elementary children. No longer is the child primed to absorb a model of what to do. Now the children are developing new cognitive powers of imagination and reason. They need opportunities to use these cognitive skills in service of their social urges. They now have the capacity to think about situations that haven't happened yet, that aren't concrete and sensorial and knowable. Now they need to know the reasons for things. And now they need grace and courtesy to be informed by their capacity for mindreading: We want to treat others as we ourselves want to be treated, because now we can recognize that others think and feel very much like ourselves. The Golden Rule can arise naturally in the moral reasoning of our elementary practice societies if the children are free to work socially just as they are free to work academically.

As much as possible, when offering grace and courtesy to elementary children, we need to include the reason for the ways that we do things. We appeal to the logic of the situation, and we involve the children in the reasoning. We use the word *because* often; it's one of their favorite words. "We change to indoor shoes *because* elementary children are free to walk in the mud and puddles outdoors, and *because* we often work on rugs on the floor, and we don't want to sit and work in the mud that comes in on our shoes. How do you want to be reminded to change to your indoor shoes?" They might want to be reminded via singing telegram (such active imaginations) but by engaging them this way, you have a better chance of coming to a compromise that works for them and keeps your floor tidy.

Powerful Imagination

One of the best ways to engage elementary children in grace and courtesy is to use the power of their imaginations through asking, "What if?" and including "what if" skits and scenarios and experiments in the grace and courtesy work. What if we didn't wash our hands after cleaning the fish tank? What if we didn't take turns at the computer but just shoved each other aside when we wanted

our turn? What if people didn't do their jobs at the end of the day? What if when we dropped something, we didn't pick it up? What if Lise never reminded us about the floor? This was one of our grace and courtesy experiments in my 9-12 community; the carpet literally disappeared under the debris. We had to come to a different agreement about how I was going to support them in keeping a tidy floor, but the cooperation was stronger as a result of the way that we experimented.

Looking at the history of our social conventions is another way to make use of the children's imaginations. Montessori wrote, "The world is acquired psychologically by means of the imagination," (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 18) and in the children's endless what-if musings, we see their efforts toward understanding the world. History itself is an imaginative exploration of how people lived and tells of the grace and courtesy that enabled people to work together to meet their fundamental physical and spiritual needs. So now our grace and courtesy presentations could include the historic reasons for the manners and mores that guide our social interactions.

No discussion of imagination for elementary children is complete without mentioning the role that fiction can play in stimulating this cognitive power. When children read fiction, or are read to, there is a powerful opportunity for the children to think about others, to get inside the minds and emotional realms of the characters and to empathize with them. In fiction, children immerse themselves in mindreading practice. Some intriguing new research suggests that humans are more prone to measurable prosocial behavior in the hours immediately after reading fiction. Other kinds of reading did not have the same effect (Oatley).

Gregariousness

Elementary children are especially drawn to each other, and because of this heightened social urge we offer group lessons and support group work. In many trainings, this tendency to associate with others as manifest in the second plane is called the *herd instinct*. Because of their gregarious nature, what the elementary children most need from grace and courtesy are the tools that enable them to work together, and they do have to work together. They share the

prepared environment, the materials, the hours of the day, and they can't develop socially without the freedom to interact meaningfully with each other. This is different from being friends or even from liking each other. "You don't have to like each other, but you do have to be civil," we tell them. Interest and liking belongs to individual children. Love and civility belongs to the class, to the community.

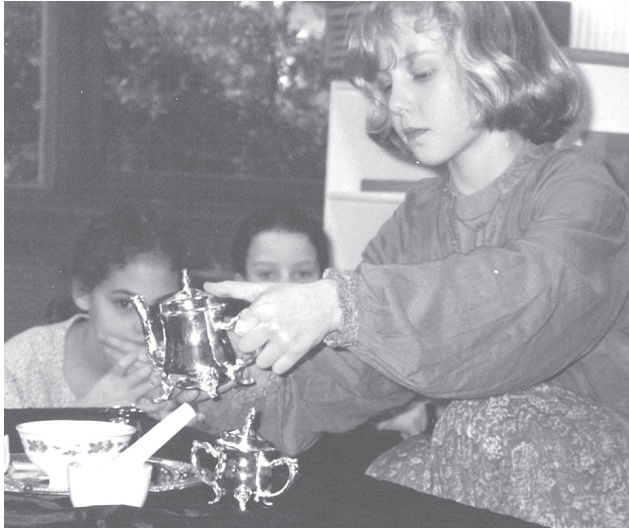
It is the role of the adult to make sure that the children have the social experiences necessary to practice these skills. They must be able to love and work with everyone in the class, not just the people they like. That civility and cooperation is far more important for the good of the world than just that we know how to get along with our friends.

One response to this characteristic gregariousness: Have class meetings. Think of each class meeting as a slightly extended (no more than a half-hour) planned (no more than once a week) grace and courtesy lesson. Just as we have individual meetings with the children to support their individual progress, we have group meetings to support the progress of our class, our practice society. This is how care of *myself* becomes care of *ourselves*.

There are some particular grace and courtesy lessons that are especially important to support the children's group work. These include

- How to effect a division of labor,
- How to recognize and invite individual strengths and potential contributions,
- How to communicate during a project, and
- How to share resources.

When we look at this list as a potential skill set, the importance of the children's activity becomes clear. They cannot learn how to do these things for themselves if we are doing them for the children. If we assign work, divide up projects so everyone has an equal share, form the groups, and manage the project timelines and the resources, we are not giving the children the opportunities to practice.



Tea ceremony

In my experience, adults can have a blind spot about the importance of the children being in charge of their learning in this way. We have to remember that efficiency is not the point: independence is the point. I've heard teachers complain about how pencils are always on the agenda for the class meeting, how the children squabble over the chess set or the foursquare court. The Montessori chat groups are full of people wanting to know how other teachers manage snack. "They spend all morning trying to figure out how to get snack...it's keeping them from their work," the teachers say. We are forgetting that figuring out how to get snack *is* the work.

Focus on Cognitive Order

When the big work is happening, the big cleaning isn't. That's what my trainer (Margaret Stephenson) used to say. We have to accept that sometimes their desire to coordinate their work with each other, the problem-solving and the solutions they come up with, is intensely satisfying to them, and we have to see these manifestations for the harmonious achievements they are, rather than for the messes they make. This doesn't mean that elementary classrooms don't have to be orderly and beautiful, it just means that we may have to appeal to the reasoning mind and the imagination to get them that way.

Hero Worship

Because of this characteristic, it's useful for elementary children to have some grace and courtesy around how to admire others and how to avail themselves of experts. Elementary children find heroes in their friends and families, in history and fantasy, in fiction, even in the non-human aspects of nature. Recognizing the strengths and gifts of others can be endearing, and it can be enriching, and it is certainly adaptive for a member of a eusocial species. Teach the children how to compliment each other, how to express their appreciation and admiration. Offer lessons on how to write a letter of appreciation, how to interview, how to observe experts in the field.

The Need to Move beyond the Classroom (Going Out)

Hero worship, when manifest as an attraction to experts, can be tied to going out, which provides a plethora of opportunities for grace and courtesy to play out in the world beyond the classroom. Learning how to behave graciously and courteously in public—on public transportation and sidewalks, in museums, libraries, theaters, parks, restaurants, stores, in other people's workspaces—are life skills that, sadly, your students might not have the opportunities to learn elsewhere in their lives. One of the best parts of grace and courtesy as part of going out is that the freedom and responsibility connections are made so clearly. When you demonstrate the responsibility to conduct yourself appropriately, then you have the freedom to go out.

I mentioned that children can find heroes in nature as well. The plant and animal kingdoms, as introduced in our stories, provide plenty of heroic material! Consider the seed striking out on its own to make a new life for itself or the first life forms colonizing the land.

Grace and courtesy is the most meaningful in meaningful contexts; manners matter more to children when those manners directly relate to their own experiences.

Elementary children are often especially warm and welcoming toward companion animals. The boy and his dog, the girl and her horse, Fern and Wilbur, these pairs have become iconic. There is no



Care of animals

doubt that elementary children form bonds with animals, and through these bonds, they have a way to experiment with and practice the kinds of social relationships that they are learning about with human beings. How a culture considers animals, how we treat them, how we care for them, how we hunt or raise them, how we protect them, how to use them to meet our own needs are all profound cultural markers. The opportunity to engage more fully and thoughtfully with the cultural meaning around animals is especially important at this age. Why are the gerbils our pets but not the worms in the compost bin? Why are we thrilled when we attract hummingbirds to the feeder, but not when we attract raccoons? How can a chicken be a pet for some families and dinner for others? What is a pet? Do all cultures have pets? Are zoos good or bad? In our zoology studies, in the care of our classroom animals, in the animal reports of the lower elementary and the campaigns to save endangered species in the upper elementary, we have many opportunities to practice grace and courtesy with other living beings.

Moral Development: Strong Interest in Fairness, Justice, and Rules

Whenever we speak of grace and courtesy for the elementary children, we're speaking of this particular characteristic. Grace and courtesy is, by definition, figuring out what is appropriate to a particular situation and then behaving accordingly. Throughout the process of behaving graciously and courteously, the child must judge for herself what is called for in the situation, what is fair and just. The child must recall whether or not there is a rule to govern this particular situation, and whether or not she wills herself to comply with that rule. Ideally, every day in the practice societies of our elementary classrooms, every child has the freedom and responsibility to engage in this kind of moral exercise. Whether it's designing/changing/arguing about the foursquare rules, helping younger children clean up from lunch, or participating in community service to the school community or beyond, elementary children need these opportunities. Grace and courtesy is the most meaningful in meaningful contexts; manners matter more to children when those manners directly relate to their own experiences.

From the telling of the very first Great Story, we give elementary children a powerful message: Here is the universe. This place has rules, and everything in it obeys natural laws. And the subtext of that message is that we too will have rules, and you will help make them.

One particular social element related to morality that I've found useful to talk about with elementary children is the idea of having a scapegoat. Sometimes there is a child who is playing that role in the class, this is the one who gets blamed for whatever goes wrong. "We're late for recess because Ryan wouldn't clean up his lunch. I couldn't get my work done because Ryan is annoying me. Ryan keeps interrupting me when I talk and that's why I'm hiding behind the shelf talking with Lee." I'm not saying that Ryan isn't doing all these things, but I'm saying the potential to start blaming everything on Ryan as a way to get out of facing responsibility is huge! Having the vocabulary with which to discuss this phenomenon has been very helpful. A related concept (from social anthropology) is that of the Wayward Puritan. From the publisher of the book *Wayward*

Puritans by Kai T. Erikson: “The main argument of *Wayward Puritans* is that deviant forms of behavior are often a valuable resource in society, providing a point of contrast, which is necessary for the maintenance of a coherent social order.” In other words, at this age of social development, the children are closely scrutinizing both the heroes and the antagonists for clues about how to behave. Pointing out to children that they’re actually learning things from that kid who keeps moving the timeline pieces when they’re not looking, that he, too, is contributing to their understanding of what makes their practice society work, has been helpful to them understanding that they truly are all in this together. It helps them feel more compassion for the digressing child.

CONCLUSION

Now I want to frame grace and courtesy in the elementary in the biggest possible sense. We know what happens in primary: There are some very explicit grace and courtesy lessons, given to the absorbent mind, for situations that the child in the first plane of development will encounter. “Let me show you what to do when you need to clean your nose/walk around someone’s work/help a friend with her coat/open the door for a visitor.” “Here’s something you can say when you don’t want your friend to sit so close to you,” or “When you want a hug, you can ask your friend like this.”

And what are the comparable situations for the elementary child, this extroverted intelligence, these children who go out and want to think for themselves? What challenges do elementary children face in their self-construction? Dr. Montessori spelled it out for us in a chapter of *To Educate the Human Potential*: “The Six Year Old Confronted With the Cosmic Plan.” So this is the ultimate grace and courtesy lesson: Here’s what you do when you’re confronted with the cosmic plan! When we frame grace and courtesy this way, it encompasses everything we offer to the elementary children. It becomes Cosmic Education, with all of its lofty, wonder-inspiring themes and messages. Through Cosmic Education, we tell the children, “We belong here.”

We. The children come to understand *we* through the Story of Humans, through the Human Timelines, through the Fundamental

Human Needs Charts, through the Hand Timeline, through the Human Interdependency Cards, and through the Pronoun Charts.

Belong. The children come to understand *belong* through understanding our special kind of love, through seeing the human beings united in supranature on the Interdependencies Chart, through the appearance of chordates and mammals on the tree of classification, through our class meetings and our conversations.

Here. The children come to understand *here* through seeing the human being on the Timeline of Life, by noticing the small red line on the long Black Strip and through all the explorations of the universe that lead to the children's understanding of physical and political geography, natural and human history, biology, cosmology, etc.

Through Cosmic Education, we tell the children, "There's Work to Do."

There's a lot of work to do, and we can work together to do it. We're working here in our classroom, nature's working, there's Work of Water and Work of Air, and there's a whole lot of collaboration and cooperation going on. We need all of our mindreading skills, all of our empathy and love, to be efficient in this work. And the



well-being of this classroom, and this universe, is dependent on everybody doing their jobs.

Through Cosmic Education, we tell the children, “We are grateful.”

There’s a lot to be grateful for, and gratitude is a theme of Cosmic Education. From the Phoenicians who helped invent the alphabet to the tiny drop of life that helped clean the seas of salt, we can give thanks. And thanks to each of us for our contributions to the whole. It’s a gift to be human, to be simple and free. Gratitude is a particularly powerful moral stance from which to exercise our human freedoms and responsibilities.

So in its largest, most cosmic sense, what is grace and courtesy for elementary children? Yes, it’s how to ask for a pencil and how to make an observer feel welcome. But it is also anything we offer to help facilitate these three cosmic themes, any way we can empower the children to believe and to act in accordance with these three truths:

We belong here.

There’s work to do, together.

Thank you.

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