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Clever Mom, Courteous Kids: The Story of a Special Plate

By Lynne Ticknor, M.A., PEP Certified Parent Educator

While at the beach a few summers ago, I received a compliment from another mom. "Your kids speak so politely with each other," she said as she watched my children build sand castles. "Not always," I said, remembering a less than friendly interaction just hours before. "But it's almost like they really . . . um ... respect and appreciate each other. How did they learn such good social skills at such an early age?" she asked.

That's when I realized it could only be one thing. "Special Plate," I said.

Her facial expression told me that she had never heard of Special Plate before, and I remembered the same confused reaction I had the first time I learned about it. At that time, my children were constantly bickering. They were on a never-ending cycle of grabbing, pushing and yelling. What unnerved me the most was the name calling and the general disrespect they showed each other: *Give me that! I want it now! No, it's mine! Get away, you poopy head! You're a stupid head! Mommmeeee!*"

Why Can't They Just Get Along?

This was a typical interaction between the two of them. "Why can't kids just get along?" I wondered. Since my husband Alan and I firmly believe that children learn by our example, I became concerned about my behavior and interactions with other people. I try to be polite and show appreciation. Admittedly, I'm not always very good at it. I can be short and demanding at times, especially towards those I love the most. I wanted my behavior to be a positive example for my children. Something had to change.

Then I remembered a parenting tip called Special Plate that I heard about at one of the parenting classes I took. It's incredibly simple to do. There's no advance planning, no cost involved, and it doesn't take any additional time out of our busy lives. With nothing to lose, my husband and I decided to try it.

That night, while I was setting the dinner table, I took out a purple plastic plate that we had never used before and set it on my daughter's place mat. The difference was quite noticeable since all of the other plates around the table were our usual white ones. As Abigail approached the table, she said, "Hey, this isn't my usual plate. What's going on here?"

Special Plate

“You’ve got Special Plate tonight, sweetie,” I said. “What’s Special Plate?” she asked wrinkling up her nose as if I had just given her a serving of Brussels sprouts (her least favorite vegetable). Taking a deep breath and hoping to get a positive reaction, I explained that at dinner every night someone gets Special Plate. During the meal, each family member takes turns saying one thing they appreciate about the person who has the plate. Special Plate rotates to a different person nightly.

I waited for her reaction. Finally, she said, “Well, what if Jack has Special Plate and I can’t think of anything that I appreciate about him?” “Hmmm, good question,” I thought to myself. I didn’t have an answer readily at hand. Luckily, my husband jumped in and said, “If nothing immediately comes to mind, you can pass until you can think of something to say.” Then he quickly added, “But you have to say something before dinner is over.”

As we began eating, she was obviously still wondering about this completely new idea. “Why are we doing this?” she asked. “Just for fun,” I said, trying to act casual. My husband and I had agreed not to associate this with the lectures we had used in the past about appreciating each other more, being polite and respecting others, being more caring, blah, blah, blah. We also agreed that if it wasn’t fun after a few nights of trying it, we would not continue.

“Well, I guess this will be okay. Go ahead – what do you appreciate about me?” Abigail asked. I said that I appreciated how she had put her dishes in the sink after lunchtime. My husband shared that he appreciated how she continued to work on her penmanship even though it was a challenging task that often frustrated her. She beamed with pride as we were giving her this feedback.

She finished her dinner more animated than ever, and I think she was even calculating which night of the week that she’d have Special Plate again. After dinner, she cleared the table (without prompting) and volunteered to help vacuum the floor and wipe the counter tops!

More Benefits

Added benefits of Special Plate are the acknowledgements my husband and I share when we are the recipients of it. Like many couples, we often take each other for granted or assume that the other person knows we appreciate certain efforts. Special Plate gives me an opportunity to acknowledge the small things my husband does that make my days a little easier (such as filling the car with gas or calling to tell me he is going to be later than expected).

These things may have gone unmentioned during a busy week of work, carpools, swim lessons, errands and laundry. Special Plate reserves just a few minutes each day to communicate gratitude and appreciation, and it provides us with an opportunity to be positive role models for our children.

Within a few weeks, I saw a difference in our interactions that extended past the dinner hour. Sure, the kids still argue sometimes, but now they notice what they appreciate about each other and they are less inclined to argue over little things. Taking a few minutes each night to participate in this activity has taught them how to show appreciation for another person, which they might not have learned at such an early age without Special Plate!

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