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Southern Living

MAY 2004

Calm, Inviting Cottage Porch

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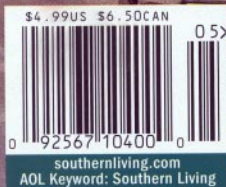
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Teaching Texas Etiquette

Youngsters and grown-ups alike learn the finer points of meeting, greeting, and eating.



PHOTOGRAPHS: MEG MCKINNEY

Likely few of these 8- to 12-year-olds attending Courtesy Camp at Spring's Raveneaux Country Club wanted to be here on this sunny summer day in north Houston. There are trees to climb, balls to bat, boys to call. Mom and dad, however, signed them up for this class to learn how to meet, greet, and eat. At least they squirm quietly while listening to an adult discuss etiquette.

Children, teenagers, and even adults learn the finer courtesies in classes led by Virginia Johnson. She owns Contemporary School of Etiquette, which she cofounded with friend Annette Geffert. (Annette has moved on to other projects.) Virginia teaches classes throughout the year at this north Houston country club and at nearby Tomball College, where she reminds grown-ups how to behave in business as well as in everyday life.



top: Kids learn how to toast. **above:** "I'm pleased to meet you." Virginia Johnson teaches both youngsters and adults the finer points of etiquette.

From Fingers to Forks

They should already know what these kids learn today. As the youngsters settle into chairs, Virginia introduces herself as a graduate of The Protocol School of Washington, "a school that teaches me to teach manners."

Manners change with centuries and

from one culture and country to another, she tells them. Youngsters giggle and groan when she quotes from 13th-century etiquette rules: "Do not spit over or on the table in the manner of hunters," and "Refrain from falling upon the dish like a swine, snorting or smacking the lips." ▶

"...because nice matters!"

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Knife on the right, fork on the left? Courtesy Camp kids practice with paper plates and plastic cups and utensils.

"We've come a long way from fingers to forks," Virginia continues. The word "fork," she tells them, derives from a Latin word, "frutca," meaning pitchfork.

Youngsters learn that etiquette means "ticket" in French. Members of the 18th-century aristocracy literally needed *etiquette* to get into the French court.

Soon, the class turns from lecture to fun demonstrations and games. The young ladies and gentlemen learn by practicing how to make introductions, how to toast, and how to set a table. Next, Virginia devises a game against the clock to see who is quickest in arranging a table place setting.

At noon, it's time to put lessons into action. The class gathers in a sunny dining room where one youngster acts as the host at each table while another leads the toasts. Soon come plates of baked chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, brown gravy, and rolls.

How To Eat a Dinner Roll

While they eat, Virginia patrols the tables like a benevolent food cop, correcting minor dining offenses.

"Take a bite before you salt," she encourages one camper who grabs the shaker as soon as her plate arrives. "You're offending your mother if you salt her cooking before you taste."

Earlier, she taught them how to eat a dinner roll properly—break off and butter one morsel at a time. Now one girl slathers butter over her entire roll, takes a big bite, and then chews thoughtfully while

"Etiquette is a set of rules, but good manners are from the heart."

Virginia Johnson, etiquette instructor

holding the bread like an apple. Two campers over, a boy dredges a small piece of roll through gravy. This young Southerner instinctively knows it's okay to sop, if done with dignity.

Reminding them of their Southern heritage, Virginia points out a few niceties of "Iced Tea Etiquette," such as returning the spoon to the saucer after sweetening the tea. If you don't have a saucer, place the spoon on the bread plate. You may also hold the spoon in your glass while drinking.

Virginia also guides grown-ups through some of the same lessons. She stresses dining, "the art of mingling," conducting successful meetings, how to toast, and how to enter and work a room.

"...because nice matters!"

texas living

Eighth-grade girls learn more than manners at "Girl's Night Out," which includes a formal tea and a four-course dining tutorial. To help offset teenage eating disorders, a nutritionist gives pointers on diet and exercise.

"Kids roll their eyes and think etiquette is about snobbishness," Virginia says. "I tell them etiquette is a set of rules, but good manners are from the heart. It's about treating people kindly."

GARY D. FORD

The Contemporary School of Etiquette: P.O. Box 690581, Houston, TX 77269; (281) 655-9265 or www.mannersplus.com.

Texas Manners

This state has its own set of etiquette dos and don'ts.

- Remove your hat when you meet a lady. Hold it at your heart, shake her hand, and slightly bow your head. Guys, women love this.
- Ladies, be kind to those behind you while seated indoors. Tone down the big hair at the theater and in church.
- Hosts should provide plenty of napkins with barbecue. Pass the ribs and brisket to your right.
- While driving a pickup on a farm-to-market or ranch road, be sure to wave as you pass traffic in the opposite lane. The "Texas Pickup Howdy" is simply a lift of the wrist off the steering wheel.
- Never ask to rope from another cowboy's horse.
- The state motto is "Friendship." *Tejas*, an Indian word, means "friend." Now, act like a Texan and be nice.

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