

## Camp Forum: For Campers/Parents: Camp Scholar: Changing a Statistic - One Camper at a Time

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### Changing a Statistic - One Camper at a Time

By **Barbara Gilmour** — Creator of [Tanner's Manners](#)

**Over the last ten years or so**, multiple surveys have reported that more than 90% of Americans consider rudeness a serious problem in our society. This is a statistic that should surprise no one. We've all witnessed road rage on our highways and even on country roads. Who hasn't tried to get the attention of a retail clerk more intent on her cell phone conversation than on helping you make a purchase? Then there is the person talking loudly on his cell phone next to your table in a restaurant, while his kids run around annoying the other customers. At a Little League game, we watch with embarrassment the volatile parent who belittles his own child at an event that is supposed to be fun.

Sad to say, in many ways, we are actually becoming accustomed to rude behaviors like these. Many of us believe rudeness is an epidemic that we are powerless to change. As individuals and as a society, we've become complacent and resigned to this behavior. We feel that the statistic is likely to get worse.

Once in a while, we wonder aloud, "How did we get to this place? What happened to good old-fashioned courtesy, civility, and respect? Why is everyone so rude?" We may not have answers for those questions, but we don't want to believe that there is nothing that can be done about the situation. We need to ask ourselves "What are we doing about it? How can the statistic be changed?"

The first thing we need to do about it is ask how our own behaviors may be contributing to the statistic. What kind of a role model are we providing for our children? As much as we want our kids to "do as we say," they will more likely "do as we do." Children learn what they live. They mimic our behavior, whether good or bad, polite or rude. What they see as acceptable behavior for mom, dad, and other adults in their lives becomes the standard for acceptable behavior for them.

Besides modeling polite behavior for our kids, we can also help them understand that there are tremendous benefits to a person and to society when people are kind, caring, considerate, civil, and respectful. Character, integrity, and well-developed social skills "pay off" in terms of peaceful and productive relationships. Not only the people who must be around us, but also we ourselves, benefit from behaving politely. People with good social skills are the ones that draw others to them; they are the truly successful ones. Our children need to understand that they can't be successful if everyone thinks they are unpleasant and self-centered. We see an extreme example of this principle in our prisons. They are full of people who never got the message that rude, selfish, uncaring, inconsiderate behaviors don't equate with success in life.

For these reasons, character education has become an important part of our national educational agenda. As a nation, we have invested considerable resources trying to promote a commitment to integrity, civility, and respect in our young people. And there's quite a lot of evidence that these efforts are making a difference, especially for children who are not receiving this kind of instruction at home. Nevertheless, our schools and

cities are still experiencing bullying and violence in staggering numbers. There's clearly more work to do in order to get the message to our young children and teens, to help them overcome the poor examples they witness everyday.

What will it take to turn the tide – to reverse the discouraging statistic? The message of change must come from every level of society – schools, government, religious and civic organizations, and from the entertainment world. We must do more to help our kids acquire social competence. Social competence means knowing what to do to get along with people. It includes social, emotional, and cognitive skills that people need to successfully adapt to the challenges of life, to respond in a healthy and appropriate way to people, responsibilities, and circumstances. If you are socially competent, you don't *need* to be rude because you are equipped with the skills you need to behave decently; you have a better chance of being liked and respected by other people who are well adjusted.

If we don't take more aggressive steps to combat rudeness, what can we expect? When rudeness is carried to an extreme, it results in a dysfunctional society characterized by frequent violence. Knowing this, more than 30 states have passed legislation requiring schools to address the issues of bullying, harassment, and intimidation. However, a great deal of this legislation clearly misses the mark. It defines, at great length, what bullying, harassment, and intimidation mean, and how schools should handle the problems after they occur. Very little is said about what schools should do to prevent the problems.

It's not enough to address destructive behaviors and social incompetence *reactively*. Parents, school personnel, community leaders, and camp directors are recognizing the need to address these issues *proactively*. Schools must equip children to understand that violence won't get them what they need and want in life. Kids need to see that the bully and the violent person represent failure on every level. Too often, kids conclude that the bully is the successful kid, the cool kid. We need to provide a counterweight to this perception. We must equip children to resist the deception that bullying and rudeness are cool. And everyone will benefit.

Homes, schools, communities, and camps will all run more smoothly if our kids are equipped with the social skills they need for success now and in the future. Social competence leads to improved behavior, tolerance for others, and respect for authority and property.

Camp has always been a place where kids developed character and improved their social skills. Camp encourages appropriate social interaction and builds self-esteem, but many kids are arriving at camp these days without even basic manners, having little respect for themselves or for others. They come with a huge social competence deficit. Camp directors are having to train staff on how to handle more and more bullying and violence.

Camps are in a perfect position to do more to promote social competence and respect. Parents and society are demanding that we actively deal with these issues in our camp programming. Parents are looking for camps that are attuned to the need for intervention and are putting their creative resources into making it fun. They are asking for a more focused, deliberate approach to social skills development; achieving a level of social competence that can change a dismal statistic.

As camp owners, directors, and staff, we should be dedicated to providing the social skills training that will insure our children's success no matter what their background. By offering social skills programs that are fun and engaging, we can level the playing field, so all kids have a chance to become contributors. As more and more camps recognize the serious need to provide social competence training that will impact a child for

a lifetime, we will see a changed statistic — one camper at a time.

**Barbara Gilmour** is the CEO of Etiquette, Etc., LLC, and creator of [Tanner's Manners: "Cool Kind Kid" Camp Kits for ages 4-6 and 7-9.](#)

Barbara, along with co-authors **Sydelle Mason, EdD.**, and **Wendy McDermott, PhD.**, has also developed the Tanner's Manners: Be a "Cool Kind Kid" Social Skills and Character Values Curriculum for elementary schools, and the "Cool Kind Kid" music CD. The CD and its 17 fun, original songs, has won 8 national awards including Teachers' Choice, Parents' Choice, and Toy and CD of the Year.

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