Behaving Yourself, Eighteenth-Century Style

Introduction

During the eighteenth century, much attention was paid to how people presented themselves (called deportment) in both public and private, and specific behaviors were required by the colonial culture and society. Such manners were distinct, specific, and related to one's social standing in the community. Children's behaviors directly reflected the social class and breeding of their family, and children were expected to behave much like adults. According to The Polite World, (Wildeblood and Brinson, 1965, p. 223) "'Good Breeding' was the term used to indicate correct and elegant deportment of the body, and the outward show of civil behavior, whereas 'good Manners' [sic] implied moral behavior." Good breeding and good manners needed to be shown at all times, but especially in formal situations, such as dinners and balls. This lesson uses George Washington's Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior In Company and Conversation as a primary source to examine these manners. Students also demonstrate proper deportment through eighteenth-century courtesies (bows and curtseys).

Objectives

In this lesson, students:

- Interpret a photo showing the proper physical “deportment” of colonial men and women
- Describe the social situations and customs for the male bow and female curtsy
- Demonstrate colonial customs of the male bow and female curtsy
- Translate into modern terms several excerpts from George Washington’s Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior In Company and Conversation
- Review social behavior vocabulary from the colonial period

Materials

- Eighteenth-Century Children Images
- Glossary
• Excerpts from Washington’s Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior In Company and Conversation
• George Wythe House Dining Room Image

Strategy
1. As a focus for this lesson, display the Eighteenth-Century Children Images. Have students note how the boy and girl are standing and sitting in a formal manner. Ask children to describe the children. How might they act every day? Write their responses (and questions) on the board. Discuss with the class that strict expectations for the arrangement of hands and feet, posture, even to the tilt of the head, all indicated a correct "deportment" required by polite society. Ask students how their opinion of the children might change if they were slumped or sloppy.

2. Hand out the Glossary. Review the terms with the class.

3. Divide the class so that boys are standing on one side of the classroom and girls on another. Instruct the students that they will now have the opportunity to practice the deportment of standing properly. The boys will learn how to bow appropriately and the girls will learn how to curtsy.

   All students should stand with their head upright, shoulders back, with the feet and legs turned outwards to a moderate degree (note the boy's legs and feet in the photo). A person standing with arms to the side would indicate the servants' class. For the gentlemen, placing the hands on the hips was more acceptable (again, note the boy's left arm). The ladies should clasp their hands in front of their stomachs. Model these instructions for the students to follow, and allow them to practice.

4. Instruct the class that men of good deportment were expected to bow when entering or leaving a room, when meeting someone, and before starting or finishing a dance. For the bow, the boys and men should extend one foot slightly in front of the body. The corresponding arm should cross the waist in front; the other arm should cross the waist in back. A longer or lower bow indicates a greater amount of respect. Model for the class and have the students practice.

5. Instruct the class that women of good deportment curtsied when greeting someone, entering or leaving a room, and when beginning or finishing a dance. The girls should stand straight but very slightly bent forward. Gently bend both knees outward, slightly lifting the heels. Arms should be clasped in front at the waist, or held easily at each side. The eyes, which should be focused on the person being greeted, should be lowered at the start of the curtsy and raised again as the body returned to an upright position, but without lowering the head.

6. After the students have practiced the bow and curtsy, have the two lines of students face one another. All the boys should bow in unison, after which the girls should curtsy toward the boys. It may be that some students are more proficient at this and can model once or twice for the whole group before everyone tries the exercise.
7. Have students return to their seats. Pass out the Excerpts from George Washington’s Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior In Company and Conversation. Explain that when Washington was a boy, he wrote down a copy of these rules from a book written by French Jesuits who had written these rules in the sixteenth century.

8. Have students read the selections (original spellings are unchanged). Students should rewrite each rule underneath in modern language. Students may work individually or in pairs. Students may also circle or underline any spellings used by Washington that have changed over time to our modern spellings for these terms.

9. Lead a class discussion of student answers.

10. Display the James Geddy House Dining Room Image. Ask students, based on the image and the George Washington’s Rules, how manners have changed and stayed the same from the eighteenth century to today.

Lesson Extensions

Have students engage in a "think-pair-share" activity of behavioral rules followed in their own homes.

What rules or regulations are required for the students' own school cafeteria? Why are such requirements necessary? How would students revise, change or add to these lists?

This lesson was written by educators Shawn Cunlisk, Vancouver, WA, and Bill Neer, Baldwinsville, NY, for the September 2012 Teacher Gazette.
Deportment Glossary

Deportment—the manner of personal conduct and behavior

Breeding—training in the proper forms of social and personal conduct

Manners—in the eighteenth century, this implied moral behavior; courteous manner that respects accepted social usage

Bow—act of bending the head or upper body as a sign of respect or greeting

Curtsy—a female formal greeting made by bending the knees

Social Class—people who have the same social, economic, or educational status

Civility—courteous behavior; politeness

Victuals—food or other provisions

Countenance—the expression on one’s face, reflecting their attitude
Eighteenth-Century Children Images
Washington’s Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior In Company and Conversation

George Washington, as a teenager, made a copy of The Rules of Civility from 110 rules written by French Jesuits in the 16th century. Read these selections dealing with appropriate behavior at the dinner table and rewrite each statement in your own words.

1. Being Set at meat Scratch not neither Spit Cough or blow your Nose except there’s a Necessity for it.

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2. Make no Shew of taking Delight in your Victuals, Feed not with Greediness; cut your Bread with a Knife, lean not on the Table neither find fault with what you Eat.

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3. Take no Salt or cut Bread with your Knife Greasy.

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4. If you Soak bread in the Sauce let it be no more than what you put in your Mouth at a time and blow not your broth at Table but Stay till Cools of itself.

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5. Put not your meat to your Mouth with your Knife in your hand neither Spit forth the Stones of any fruit Pye upon a Dish nor Cast anything under the table.

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6. Put not another into your Mouth til the former be Swallowed let nor your Morsels be too big for the Gowls.

7. Drink not nor talk with your mouth full neither Gaze about you while you are a Drinking.

8. Cleanse not your teeth with the Table Cloth Napkin Fork or Knife but if Others do it let it be done wt. a Pick Tooth.

9. Be not Angry at Table whatever happens & if you have reason to be so, Shew it not but on a Cheerfull Countenance especially if there be Stranges for Good Humor makes one Dish of Meat a Feast.

10. If others talk at Table be attentive but talk not with Meat in your Mouth.
George Wythe House Dining Room Image