

# MANNERS MATTER

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILDREN PICK UP GOOD HABITS THAT WILL STAY WITH THEM FOR LIFE? JENNY SHAND REPORTS

**G**ood manners and habits play a critical role in helping children set up strong support networks for their future.

Geelong clinical psychologist Megan Henderson says parents must be on the front foot when imparting these valuable skills, leading by example and being consistent in their teaching.

"Parents very much take on a coaching role in instilling and teaching these skills in our children," she says.

"Good manners and habits are very important, they help children develop and maintain friendships.

"If you are considered a rude person, it's not necessarily as easy to make friends as if you are a well-mannered child. And kids learn very quickly in the social environment, that kids don't like others who aren't polite."

Dr Henderson, who works at Geelong-based psychology practice Chris Mackey and Associates, says parents should start the learning process with their youngsters from birth by modelling good behaviour.

"As humans, we are social beings so we learn a lot through observation and that social modelling of desirable behaviour by parents, and friends too, is very important," Dr Henderson says.

Learning general etiquette, how to be considerate, take turns, respect others and have empathy can all make children's paths much smoother, impacting on their teenage years and later life.

"Modelling respect for others is the big one," Dr Henderson says.

"It comes back to them establishing a social network. If children have an established social network then it's a protective buffer in promoting positive mental health. If they don't have that network, then they can be more at risk of mental health problems."

Young children absorb how people are behaving around them "like little sponges" and teaching manners such as 'please' and 'thank you' can start at an early age. Youngsters will be influenced by how parents behave at



the table, in the house and in the outside world.

The clinical psychologist is also a firm believer in the power of praise.

"Praise is more effective than punishment," Dr Henderson says.

"Even though time out can be a very effective tool for parents to use, we know that praising a child when they are using good manners is the way to go about it.

"Feed what you want to grow. Give reinforcement for desirable behaviour."

But she also advises parents not to gloss over inappropriate behaviour. Talk about why the behaviour is not OK and respond when it happens. Get the child to model the desired behaviour and praise them for their efforts.

"Young kids need boundaries but sometimes parents don't want to put them there for various reasons," the psychologist says.

"They'd rather be a friend than a parent but kids actually thrive on boundaries and need them."

A child's path towards good manners and habits usually has plenty of ups and downs.

"Valuable learning comes from making mistakes," Dr Henderson says.

"None of us are perfect and it's all about learning and growing from experience."