



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Teaching Girls to Be Ladies

Guest(s): Dr. James Dobson

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. You know, you don't have to look far to see that civility is in short supply these days. Rude behavior, crude language, and a general carelessness toward others have become so common that most of us barely even notice them anymore. But the second president of the United States, John Adams, believe that manners and morals are inseparable and that the moral character of a nation rises or falls on what's taught inside the home. On today's edition of Family Talk, Dr. James Dobson reads a chapter from his book, *Bringing Up Girls*, exploring how parents can reclaim that standard for their daughters, instilling confidence, godly character, and the kind of grace that outlasts any cultural trend. It's a message that's countercultural indeed, but it's also timeless. So let's get into it right now on today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Having explored a few of the neurological and physiological intricacies of the human female brain, let's take the next logical step and consider how girls should be raised. That'll take us from nature where we began to nurture, which is another infinitely complex subject. To address it, I want to step back a couple of hundred years and get a running start at the principles that matter most. The ideas and perspectives I will share were true two centuries ago and they're precisely on target today. We began by revisiting the beliefs and writings of the second president of the United States, John Adams. He was a prolific reader, statesman, and author, and he made an incalculable contribution to our country. He was not a perfect man, but he lived by a standard of righteousness throughout his adult life. In his autobiography, Adams wrote a commentary on the subject of moral behavior, which he called manners.

Though the language is formal and dated, I urge you to listen to these words carefully and thoughtfully. They carry great meaning for us today. Adams wrote, "From all that I read of history and government, of human life and manners, I have drawn this conclusion that the manners of women are the most infallible barometer to ascertain the degree of morality and virtue in a nation. All that I've since read and all the observation I've made in different nations have confirmed me in this opinion. Manners of women are the surest criterion by which to

determine whether a Republican government is practicable in a nation or not. The foundations of national morality must be laid in private families. In vain are schools, academies, and universities instituted if loose principles and licentious habits are not impressed upon children in their earliest years. And this is the key sentence. The mothers are the earliest and most important instructors of youth.”

How insightful it is that Adams place the responsibility for the essential moral character of the nation squarely on the shoulders of mothers. Fathers play a key role too, of course, but moms are absolutely indispensable. It is their primary task to transmit enduring principles of right and wrong to the next generation. The old Proverb is still true that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. If women grow weary of that responsibility or if they lose sight of their own moral compass, no other institution or governmental agency will be able to save the nation. So wrote President John Adams. To paraphrase, Adams was saying that a representative form of government such as ours cannot survive without a spiritual foundation because its citizens are masters of their own destinies. That is the great vulnerability of a democracy. Our political system, which Abraham Lincoln said is intended to be of the people by the people, for the people, can be no more stable than the collective character of its citizenry.

It's all up to us. There is no king, dictator, or tyrant to restrain our behavior. If we choose evil, there will be no stopping us. In short, our national sovereignty depends on the transmission of the nation's morals and manners to children, and that task should begin in the nursery. But what form does this early training take in today's world? It begins with basic civility because manners and morals are directly connected. As Horace Mann said, manners easily and rapidly mature into morals. The first tends to lead to the second. In centuries past, cultured and religious families understood this relationship. They were aware that girls and boys and all of humanity are flawed and inherently sinful. Thus, old English and early American societies worked diligently at teaching what were called the social graces. Teaching manners was their highest priority because of the connection to Christian piety. Alas, American and British cultures in the 21st century have swung to the other end of the continuum.

Young girls are often allowed and even encouraged to be brash, rude, crude, profane, immodest, immoral, loud, and aggressive. Some of this behavior has been consciously taught in recent years under the rubric of assertiveness training. To the extent that such programs were designed to instill confidence in bashful, frightened young women, I supported them. But some girls have been taught the worst characteristics of uncivil males. I know my words must sound horribly old-fashioned and archaic at this point, but there is something important here for us to consider. Obviously, human nature has not improved much in the past several hundred years, nor will it ever. What has changed, as I have described, is that many parents have become far too distracted, overworked, and stressed out to care much about teaching morals and manners to their children. Jolene Savage, who runs the Social Graces School of Etiquette

in Topeka, Kansas, says society has reached an all-time low when it comes to matters of civility.

Exhausted moms and dads seem not to have noticed what has happened to their children. Clearly, instruction and civility is needed now more than ever. Getting that done, however, can be a challenge. Once again, speaking directly to mothers, it's your job to acculturate your daughters and to help them become ladies. Does that sound chauvinistic in our high tech world? I suppose it does, but even so, it makes sense. As Lisa Fisher, an instructor at the Final Touch Finishing School in Seattle, Washington said, "Etiquette has to do with knowing the rules. Therefore, girls should be taught how to eat, talk, walk, dress, converse on the telephone and respond to adults with respect and poise. Parents should demonstrate good posture and table manners for them, such as putting a napkin in the lap, showing them where to play silverware and not talking with food in their mouths. They should also explain that burping and gobbling food and picking teeth are rude.

I also firmly believe that you should require your kids to say thank you and please. To demonstrate that ours is not a gimme, gimme world. Appreciation is an attitude best cultivated at home. Teach techniques of personal grooming, hygiene, and nutrition. Role play with them about being gracious hosts and how to formally introduce parents or friends to each other. Require them to excuse themselves when leaving the table and explain how to make friends, how to take turns talking in a group and how to make eye contact. You might even help them learn how to cook and care for children. Wouldn't that be something novel? Although I'm not an expert in teaching girls some of the social graces that I've named, I learned a masculine version of the rules. I know them when I see them. Let me offer a technique that I came across several years ago.

It's designed to teach boys and girls the art of conversation. I've shared it before, but I include it here for the benefit of those who haven't been paying attention. It begins by facing your daughter about six feet away and telling her that you're going to play a game together. Then call attention to the tennis ball that you're holding, which you proceed to bounce in her direction. After she catches the ball, stand there looking at each other for a moment before saying, "It isn't much fun if you hold the ball, is it? Why don't you throw it back? Your daughter will probably return the ball rather quickly. Stand motionless for a few seconds and then say, Okay, I'm sending it back to you now. The child will be curious about what's going on. Then sit down together and describe the meaning of the game. Tell her that talking together is a game called conversation and it only works if the ball is thrown back.

If a person bounces a question to you and you hold it, the game ends. Neither you nor the partner has any fun. But if you throw it back, you're playing the game properly. Follow up by saying, "Suppose I ask, 'did you like the book you've been reading?' I have thrown the ball to you. If you simply say yes and reply, then you have caught and held the ball. But if you say, "The book was very interesting. 'I like reading about animals.' You've thrown the ball back." Then

tell the child, 'I can keep the conversation going by asking what kind of animals interest you most.' If you say dogs, then you have held the ball again. But if you tell me, I like dogs because they're warm and cuddly. The ball has been bounced back to me. The idea is to keep the game going until the two of us have finished talking.

Kids usually catch onto this game quickly. Afterwards, you can build on the concept by commenting on interchanges that occur with friends and adults. While manners tend to facilitate morals, there's another reason to teach them. They also help develop confidence and poise. A girl who has been trained properly is never completely knocked off balance when she's in an unfamiliar circumstance. She knows what's expected of her and how to deal with it. Her sense of self-worth is reinforced by the way adults react to her charm, poise, and grace. For the mother who wants to give her daughter a head start in life and help her compete socially. This is a great place to begin. These diverse skills used to be taught to girls in mandatory homemaking classes. Alas, most of those programs were canceled after the revolution of the '60s and America became the worst for it.

Road rage, loud cell phone conversations in restaurants, cutting in line, throwing litter from car windows and general nastiness are now everyday occurrences. Monica Brandner teaches at an etiquette business for children and youth called Final Touch Finishing School. She says that manners are primarily about how we treat others and ourselves. Cheryl Eberly, who wrote *365 Manners Kids Should Know*, agrees. She says living by the golden rule releases the power of a thankful heart to those trained to practice it. She also reminds us, and this is a great point, that when we teach social graces to our children, we're training the next generation in self-government and self-control. John Adams must be smiling from the other side. In short, teaching manners to girls is about helping them to become young ladies in a not very civil world. I assure you that *MTV* and an increasingly crude culture will do everything possible to carry our daughters and our sons downstream toward that which is boorish and uncouth.

You can help them paddle upstream. One technique that my wife used to teach social graces to our daughter was to play feminine games together. For example, they held elaborate tea parties when Danae was four or five years of age. The child loved them. Their make-believe names were Mrs. Perry, that was Danae, Mrs. Snail, her mom, and a little boy named Mr. Green who was drafted into service. Other available kids and their moms from the neighborhood were invited on occasion. This fun activity allowed my wife to explain how silverware was supposed to be arranged. How to eat soup without slurping. How to hold and drink from a teacup, how to use a napkin, how to chew with mouths closed, how to hold a conversation. Why they should wait to eat until everyone at the table was served, et cetera. It's amazing how effective these tea parties were in teaching common politeness.

I was never invited to join them and I definitely felt left out. But what about moms who haven't been trained in social etiquette themselves? They can hardly

pass on what they haven't learned. And what can we suggest for those who are simply too busy to tackle the job? That's where professional etiquette training comes in. Classes are popping up in cities across the country to meet this precise need. Though these training programs can be expensive, they are worth the cost for parents who can afford them. For those who don't have the resources, some churches and women's clubs are providing assistance. Furthermore, we should never forget what some grandmothers have to offer in teaching these concepts. They are likely to remember a more genteel era and their granddaughters will enjoy the attention that comes with the training. Another source of assistance for moms and dads is the array of materials and manuals now available.

I have mentioned several of them which appear at the end of this book. Some would question whether it's even desirable for a girl to be feminine in a traditional sense, fearing that it will signal a return to the oppression of a patriarchal era when women had to hide their intelligence and conceal their accomplishments. Hear me out, moms. Not for a moment would I try to take away the hard won achievement of respect and emancipation enjoyed by today's women. Those cultural advances are here to stay and may they long endure. On the contrary, I would point out that femaleness and weakness are not synonymous. Femininity and strength of character are often very close neighbors. I come from a family of strong women who knew who they were and where God was leading them. They took a backseat to no one. My grandmother co-pastored a thriving church with my grandfather.

She could preach up a storm. I can't imagine anyone telling her to sit down, fold her arms, and keep her mouth shut. One of her daughters became my mother, who was also a very confident and accomplished lady. Yet my mother and her sisters were undeniably feminine. My mom and dad loved each other deeply and they had a very healthy relationship based on their identities as a woman and a man. He was very respectful, protective, and supportive of her. I never saw him treat her rudely or harshly. After I was grown, I remember getting upset at my mom for something that she said that irritated me. I made the mistake of telling my dad about it. I'll never forget him turning those steely blue eyes on me and saying angrily, "Listen, bud. Your mother's the best friend you have, and I won't stand for you saying anything disrespectful about her." It was the end of the conversation.

When dad called me Bud, I knew it was time to back off. On the other side of the ledger, my mom honored my dad, not just as her husband, but also as a man. She would not have thought of failing to have a meal waiting for him when he came home. Being from the South, she was not offended when he called from his big chair where he was reading a book. He would say, "Hey, Myrt, bring me a cup of coffee, please." He was her man and she took care of him. It was a relationship based on mutual respect and it was highly successful. They both understood manners and morals and their relationship to spirituality, masculinity, and femininity. My parents modeled them consistently throughout my childhood. I displayed that training on my first date with a cute co-ed named

Shirley. I took her to a classy restaurant in Hollywood, California, where I told the host where we wanted to sit.

Then I helped Shirley with her chair. I asked what she wanted to eat, and I conveyed her order to the waiter. We engaged each other in conversation for more than an hour, mostly about Shirley. Then I paid the check and I took her to my car. I walked on the outside of the sidewalk nearest the street, which was and still should be symbolic of a guy's responsibility to protect the woman in his care. I opened the car door for her and we drove back to our college. I parked, came around to her side of the car, opened the door and walked Shirley to the front door of her dorm. She thanked me with a smile and we said goodnight. I didn't try to kiss her since that would have put her in a compromising position on a first date, as though she owed me something as a payback.

I still try to show her the same courtesies and respect that helped me win her heart in the first place, and she knows all the ways to please me. So much has changed in the culture since then. I will tell you that I'm disgusted by the way young men treat their girlfriends today. Some guys will honk from the street waiting for a girl to come out. They stay behind the steering wheel while she opens her own door, and then they take her to a McDonald's or a Taco Bell. Often the guy will even expect his date to pay for her own food, and they both contribute to the tip. Do you know why this happens? Because girls tolerate it. I would advise a young lady who is expected to pay for her meal to do so only once. She should then ask to be taken straight home and never agree to see the dude again.

Any man who is that disrespectful doesn't deserve a second chance. Women hold the keys to masculine behavior. Guys are inclined to take what they can get and be no more accommodating than they have to be. To some degree, the lack of culture and refinement that we see in many of today's men is the fault of women who ask for and get little or nothing. If a girl sees herself as a lady, she will expect her escort to behave like a gentleman. He will respect her if she respects herself. If she wants him to be spiritually sensitive, she should go out with him only if he accompanies her to church. If she objects to his use of profanity, she should simply not accept it. If she wants him to think of her often and call her on the phone, she should wait for him to get the idea himself.

Female aggressiveness is a turnoff to most men. I don't care if the rules have changed. It's still a bad idea for a girl to pursue a guy breathlessly. She should let him be the initiator. That's the way he is made. Parents teach these concepts to your girls. If your daughter wants her boyfriend to take her to nice places, she should expect him to make the plans for an evening together and to ask her out at least a week ahead of time. If he shows up unannounced on Friday night and says, "Want to hang out?" She should tell him she has other things to do. If she wants him to be a gentleman, then she should require him to act like one. And she should always remember that she is a lady. If a woman wants a man to marry her, she must not make herself available sexually.

That wrecks a relationship. Besides, it's morally wrong. Under no circumstances should she live with a guy before marriage. She will probably wind up getting hurt and living to regret it. He will get what he wants and she will get nothing. The number one reason men give for marrying late or not at all is because they can get everything they want, including love and sex without commitment. A moral, self-respecting woman simply will not play that game. If it becomes obvious that a guy is not going to commit, she should send him packing. Period. Don't argue with the jerk about it. Just cut him loose. Don't blame a guy if he's unmannerly and exploitative. Show him what you expect. And if he balks, move on quickly. If he's a big drinker and uses illicit drugs, run from him. He's trouble on the hoof. Don't give him a beachhead in your heart.

There is someone better out there for you if you set your standards high. It comes down to this. The relationship between a man and a woman throughout their lives together. If indeed they do marry, will reflect the ground rules set by the woman when they're courting. She can change him then, but probably not after. She should not settle for anything less than what she needs emotionally. High on her list of priorities should be a mutual understanding about manners and morals. It's the way men and women have related to each other for thousands of years, and it still provides a basis for healthy families that are equipped to go the distance. However, teaching girls to be ladies is not enough. We must also give them a strong biblical foundation from which morals and virtue can evolve. Our hope is that our daughters will someday pass along those verities to the next generation.

No other priority comes close to this one in significance. For now, it seems appropriate to return to the words of President John Adams who gave this solemn charge to the nation's women. You'll recall that he said, "The foundations of national morality must be laid in private families. The mothers are the earliest and most important instructors of youth." It was true in 1798 and it's still true today.

Roger Marsh:

And especially here in 2026, the culture today will always push back against parents who are trying to raise children with character and conviction. But Dr. Dobson has reminded us today that it is definitely worth the fight to keep pushing for those biblical values. You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson here on Family Talk, drawing from his book called *Bringing Up Girls*. Remember, you can go to jdfi.net and learn more about the many resources Dr. Dobson wrote throughout his life in ministry. And if you'd like to hear this program again or pass it along to a fellow parent, go to jdfi.net as well. And if today's program resonated with you, we have a free resource that goes even deeper. The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute has developed a 10-day email series based on the *Bringing Up Girls* book designed to help you navigate the cultural challenges your daughter is facing and equip you to raise her with godly character and confidence.

Now to sign up for the free “Bringing Up Girls” email series, go to jdfi.net and search for that phrase, Bringing Up Girls. Again, you'll find that information at jdfi.net. That's also the most direct route to get you to drjamesdobson.org.

The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute was founded on the belief that strong families rooted in biblical truth and the gospel of Jesus Christ are the foundation of a strong society. This ministry has spent decades standing for what matters most from defending the sanctity of human life to equipping parents with practical, biblical wisdom. And this legacy continues now that Dr. Dobson has received his eternal reward. If the ministry of Family Talk has made a difference in your life, if it's helped you in your marriage, in your parenting or in your walk with God, I invite you to join our team here and help us reach even more families in need. To make a secure donation, of course you can do so at jdfi.net. If you'd like to make a contribution over the phone, a member of our constituent care team will be happy to take your call at 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for spending time with us today. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.