

Modern Mary Poppins Transforming Children ...One Handful of Sugar at a Time

By Nina McDonald

It's the modern family's challenge: How do two working parents raise healthy, happy, respectful children in an increasingly selfish and troubled society?

The innocence of childhood has been replaced by a cocky, self-absorbed generation that tends to communicate in snarky one-liners stolen from sit-com hell. With ears plugged into their ubiquitous mp-3 players, today's children have effectively tuned out any message that isn't delivered in a hip-hop beat.

What's the overwhelmed 21st century mom or dad to do?

Karien Bennett may just have the answer.



Bennett is the owner and primary instructor for The Club 4 Me: a combination etiquette, cooking and life-skills school for elementary and middle-school children.

Learning good manners as a safeguard in today's perilous cultural climate may seem like a quaint idea to parents who worry more about whether or not their kids will be able to avoid the modern mine-fields of drugs, sex and multiple piercings.

However, Bennett says a foundation in etiquette may just be the most crucial thing these children can learn. For Bennett there is nothing more important than building solid character by inspiring children to rise to a higher level of social awareness and behavior.

"Kids today are highly educated in just about everything except manners. Society demands so much of us today; manners are life skills we give the kids. We have forgotten that they are really an essential tool for the kids to grow up as fully-functioning, productive members of society."

The captivating, fifty-something mother of three comes across like a proper British nanny, with a



touch of glamorous fairy-god-mother. The combination is truly magical.

Her young protégés hang on every word she says in her lilting Afrikanns accent.

Call her “the child-whisperer.” A life coach for kids.

According to Bennett, the best way to transform manner-less children into miniature ladies and gentlemen is by teaching them a new language.

“At the beginning of every class, I ask my students if they can speak any other languages. Then I tell them that they are going to learn a language that everyone understands, the language of manners, which is the same all over the world.”

Bennett’s dream is to one day see her classes on television. That way the lessons her students learn could be constantly reinforced.

“There is nothing on television right now that is like what I teach my kids. The only way to really learn something is through repetition,” says Bennett. “Only a few kids at a time can take my classes right now. It would be so wonderful to be able to reach more children. Children from every walk of life, not just those whose parents can afford to give them classes in etiquette.”

Move over Mr. Rogers: Mrs. Bennett is in the neighborhood.

Bennett may be just the right person at the right time to step into those very big shoes. Since Rogers passed away in 2003, a glaring void in children’s programming has yet to be filled.

Bennett has the perfect combination of skills and personality, plus that elusive “star-quality” that would make her a natural successor to Rogers.

One can easily see Bennett making good manners popular again. At least among the younger set. And where better to start.

“You have to reach them when they are young. Between the ages of 4 to 12. After that they are formed.” With a degree in child development, Bennett has the credentials and experience to speak authoritatively on the subject.

Academic qualifications aside, Bennett manages to turn a mundane lesson in manners into a magical moment. She effortlessly connects with the children on their level. The simple act of washing one’s hands before a meal is transformed through Bennett’s insightful skill.

And, like the fictional Mary Poppins, Bennett knows that a bit of sugar can help the lesson “go down.”

Six little girls are eagerly holding out their hands as Bennett doles out small scoops of brown sugar into their upraised palms. Each child is allowed a small pump of liquid soap as Bennett instructs them to rub the sugar and soap over their hands and then rinse under the faucet.

“See how smooth your hands are?” coos Bennett. “Isn’t that wonderful? Don’t you always want your hands to be this pretty and feel this good?”

The girls ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ and caress their hands. Each child is given a small container of the sugar to use at home. It’s for sure; these little ladies will never come to the dinner table with grimy hands again.

Parents rave about her influence with their children.

"She is fantastic," says Laura Orlowsky, whose daughters Zofia and Kaleen have attended two seasons of Bennett’s classes. "She epitomizes good manners, beauty and elegance."

Hope Wiley, whose daughter Natalie who also attends adds, "Coming from another person like Karien, instead of just mom or dad, and seeing your friends do it too, is much more powerful. It really reinforces what I try and teach her at home."

There seems to be a *trickle-up* effect on the parents as well.

More than once, Bennett has heard how children have brought their new awareness of proper etiquette home, only to (politely, of course!) remind an uncouth dad or absent-minded mother to “open the door for mom” or “please don’t speak with their mouth full.”

Born and raised in South Africa, Karien began her career in education, as a first grade teacher, and ballet instructor. She has over twenty-five years of experience working with children and young adults. Her professional accomplishments include successful clubs for teens, radio and television programs relating to etiquette and social issues facing teenagers, as well as articles in various publications.

In 1990 Bennett relocated to Southern California where she worked as a career counselor, assisting international students who wished to study in the United States.

Bennett initially intended her classes to be only for girls, however her eight-year-old son Austin urged her to open the lessons to boys resulting in a "Mr. Cool" class for first, second and third graders as well as the already popular "Little Miss Manners" classes for girls.

These are not your basic "eating-with-the-right-fork" and "remembering-to-say-please-and-thank-you" classes.

Bennett's believes in equipping her students with skills they can build on for the rest of their lives.

She covers an incredible variety of practical topics. Cooking, sewing, posture, flower arranging, telephone manners, trying new foods and the inevitable dilemma of “what to do when you don't like what you just put in your mouth”.



Introductions and first impressions, personal grooming, spot cleaning and how to create and write and respond to invitations, as well as how to respond when you are not invited, are all addressed.

Bennett also works with her students on more serious issues such as conflict resolution, dealing with cliques and being rejected by friends.

Parents say their children leave feeling special and ready to cope in any social situation.

Sandi Burke takes her son Adam to Karien's for class once a month. "I think manners are so important. They seem to be missing from society today, Karien is so gifted in socializing the kids and teaching them how to deal with conflict and be considerate to one another."

Bennett's belief that “deep down” kids really want to do what is right, may be the secret ingredient in her success. Her genuine love and concern is obvious.

“They don't want to have other kids look at them and think they are gross. If someone shows them how to do the right thing, then they want to be that way. I make them feel that they are leaders, trend-setters. ”

For more information go to www.theclub4me.com or call Karien Bennett at 619-307-9015.