



## AFTER A MANNER

*The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes has a cure for the rude and raucous in any child.*

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

**E**lbows on the table, talking with a full mouth and slouching in the chair – just a few behaviors parents are delighted to have corrected during Mimi's Manners – Etiquette For Children, hosted at The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes. In a formal dining room set with linen napkins, china and silver, 10 to 15 children ages 6 to 12 are miraculously transformed into ladies and gentlemen during a fun evening designed to develop their social graces. The classes are full and the parents proud, instilling the confidence that they can take their kids anywhere, even the most elevated of dining establishments.

Many are also tired of being the enforcers of manners at home and know that what sounds like nagging or nit-picking from Mom and Dad suddenly sounds like gospel from Mimi's creator and facilitator, Suzanne Willis. A modern day Emily Post, Willis has been teaching etiquette for more than five years to literally

thousands of children, teens, recent college graduates and even men (at the request of long-suffering wives).

Mimi's Manners, however, is for kids only, and parents have to hit the road once class begins. Most of the young participants are genuinely looking forward to the experience and appreciate how special it is to have an evening devoted entirely to them. This is immediately reinforced when they spot their names written on formal place cards. The event begins with attendees introducing themselves, followed by a brief lesson on the art of the handshake: Connect your hand fully, look the other person straight in the eye and say something complimentary. Everyone stands up to practice, instantly creating a comfortable atmosphere of friendly faces.

It's obvious that Willis understands children. She seems to anticipate their never-ending need to know *why* and always explains the motives behind the manners. It's incredible how

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quickly Willis wins over the room. Within minutes they're hanging on her every word, vying for her attention, shooting their hands up to be the one she chooses to answer her next question. She works her magic, and the night becomes what one 6-year old described as "almost as good as the Pirate and Princess Party."

Willis covers all sorts of situations, such as where to place your dinner napkin if you leave the table and what to do if you're served something you don't like – no doubt a common predicament for picky eaters. She uses mnemonic tricks to help her charges remember rules, such as which water glass and bread plate belongs to whom.

The soup course arrives, and we're taught to spoon our soup "out to sea and then back to me" to avoid splatter-

ing soup on our clothing. A tangy intermezzo is served next, and we cleanse our palettes before the main entrée arrives. Before it does, we're given a quick lesson on how to hold our fork and knife (American or Continental style), where to place them in the rest position and where to place them to indicate we've finished our meal.

Don't think for a second that service is compromised because of the young age of the attendees. In fact, it's flawless with most dishes presented in the French synchronized style.

By the time dessert arrives, we've learned many practical things, such as how to write thank you cards and how to make a toast. Never patronizing or condescending, Willis uses movie references and analogies to make her les-

sons stick like glue. Instruction is well balanced with discussion, participation and practice, and the two hours goes by in a flash.

The most magical thing about Mimi's Manners is that Willis makes learning etiquette incredibly fun. The entire evening costs \$70 per child, including tax and tip: A fair price when you consider that having your children learn to put their best foot forward will serve them for years to come – no matter what size that foot becomes.

*The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes presents Mimi's Manners four to five times per year and has scheduled a special summer session. For details, call 407-206-2400.*