



# Playgrounds | “Digital Manners” Charting the Course of Politeness in Tomorrow’s World

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## Description

”Digital Manners: Cultivating Conscious Communication in Tomorrow’s World In an age where screens are as common as faces, ”Digital Manners” probes the essence of courtesy amidst the rise of human–technology interaction. This children’s book is a canvas reflecting centuries-old customs of politeness, now at an inflection point with the advent of digital dialogue.

**The Courtesy Conundrum:** Politeness in language is a key aspect that sets humans apart from other species. Brown<sup>1</sup> constitutes it as involving being mindful of others’ feelings and how they prefer to be treated in conversations. This includes showing proper respect for their social status and the nature of your relationship with them. Politeness means often communicating in a less direct or more nuanced way to consider these feelings. This approach leads to indirectness in language, as people choose their words carefully to align with their intentions and respect the other person and keeping one’s ”face,” or public persona<sup>2</sup>. Essentially, politeness permeates our speech, reflecting the core of human social interactions. ”Children learn politeness from a young age through ’language socialization’<sup>3</sup>. This process is two-fold: it involves learning through language and learning to use language effectively. As children develop their language skills, like vocabulary and grammar, they also grasp social norms, including the

appropriate use of language to express actions, activities, stances, and identity. Verbal routines play a vital role in both language learning and socialization. These routines offer a predictable framework for children to engage in various interactions<sup>4</sup> and display a key part of socialization in many cultures worldwide. Research shows that with the enriching technological environments in which children move, there has been a shift in the language of children that no longer corresponds to the ethical and aesthetic values of interpersonal relationships in the respective society<sup>5</sup>. Being digital therefore seems to have an influence on our language. Is it the lack of emotional feedback? Is cyberspace a vacuum for language? What is certain is that language learning is inseparable from the supportive environment of children, making politeness a habit<sup>6</sup>.

**Possible Futures:** The debate about how we will deal with politeness towards AI systems in the future is multifaceted, involving social, ethical, and psychological dimensions. It varies based on the type of AI system, the context of interaction, and the potential impacts on human behavior, especially in children. Patrizia Ribino<sup>7</sup> has devoted her review to current issues relating to politeness and human–technology interaction. Do we want to designate an AI system as a peer just because it holds more and more anthropomorphic characteristics?

Do we therefore want to apply social norms and expectations to AI systems? What does that do to children’s perception of AI as living beings? Should we promote human-like behavior toward AI systems in children–machine interaction and in which ways does it influence their development? As the trend of making technology more human-like continues, it’s important to consider the ethical, psychological, and educational implications as we must stress that an interaction with individuals, in the light of politeness theory, should be more valuable than with a machine. Research indicates that this anthropomorphization necessitates specific design considerations, especially when AI systems are used by vulnerable groups like children. Due to their developmental stage, young children may not fully grasp that a device, despite having human-like characteristics, is not a living entity. This misunderstanding could potentially lead to the development of impolite behaviors in their interactions with other people.

Amazon has introduced a new feature for its smart assistant, Alexa that aims to address concerns from parents and researchers and to promote politeness among children<sup>8</sup>. This feature, named ”Magic Word,” encourages children to use ”Please” and ”Thank you” when interacting with Alexa.” Their approach to encouraging politeness is based on positive reinforcement rather than punishment, an insight deriving from the inclusion of developmental experts. Google took it one step further introducing ”Pretty Please”, a children-friendly feature to their smart home products that is capable of countering impolite demands with the phrase ”Say the magic word!” Researchers admit that this feature is mainly useful for younger children, as they adapt to such habits first by learning how to use polite language, whereas older children who have already learned when to use polite language are more likely to differentiate between a robot and a human being.

Reminiscent of the questions deriving from extant literature, these examples of an extensions of human social norms to software also shows that we might be inadvertently teaching children to view machines as entities with emotions, similar to humans. Encouraging politeness towards technology could imply that AI assistants possess feelings and can appreciate or resent our actions. It may also suggest that these machines have certain rights, including the right to deny our requests.

Furthermore, this approach risks blurring the lines between humans and machines. Instructing children to use polite phrases like “please” and “thank you” with software, where emotional context is absent, could be interpreted as encouraging them to engage in courtesy mechanically, without genuine sentiment or consideration for its impact or significance.

”Digital Manners” deliberately adopts this critique, fostering a narrative where children learn the significance of empathy with humans while approaching technology with straightforward practicality. It’s a choice that amplifies the distinction between sentient and synthetic, advocating for the preservation of emotional intelligence.

**Execution:** Crafted with AI-generated content, ”Digital Manners” adds another dimension to the discourse on societal values in child-rearing. We follow Alex, a child learning to navigate human and technological interactions. Through Alex’s experiences, the book contrasts the warmth of empathetic communication with people against the straightforward efficiency required with technology. The plot shows Alex adapting efficiency-driven communication styles to an interaction with a friend and sees which emotional feedback he gets in return, eventually learning about adequacy of polite language. This narrative encapsulates the book’s core idea: guiding children in understanding and adapting to different communication realms. Each page is a convergence of traditional storytelling and AI innovation, a mirror asking us to reflect on AI’s burgeoning role in shaping our children’s social ethos. This book is a catalyst for conversation, an invitation to ponder the imprint of AI-cultivated manners on the social fabric of our youth, as they grow in a world where digital and human realms coalesce.

<sup>1</sup> Brown, P. (2015). Politeness and Language. In International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (pp. 326–330). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.53072-4>

<sup>2</sup> Goffman, E. (1968). Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior.

<sup>3</sup> Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B. (2008). Language Socialization: An Historical Overview. In N. H. Hornberger (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Language and Education (pp. 2580–2594). Springer US. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3\\_193](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_193)

<sup>4</sup> Peters, A. M., & Boggs, S. T. (1987). Interactional routines as cultural influences upon language acquisition. In B. B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), Language Socialization across Cultures (1st ed., pp. 80–96). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/C09780511620898.004>

<sup>5</sup> Chen, G. M. (2015). Losing Face on Social Media: Threats to Positive Face Lead to an Indirect Effect on Retaliatory Aggression Through Negative Affect. Communication Research, 42(6), 819–838. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215510937>

<sup>6</sup> Mustadi, A., & Amelia, R. (2023). Children’s Politeness in Digital Era. In R. Harold Elby Sendouw, T. Pangalia, S. Pasandaran, & V. P. Rantung (Eds.), Proceedings of the Unima International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities (UNICSSH 2023) (Vol. 698, pp. 115–123). Atlantis Press SARL. [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-35-0\\_15](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-35-0_15)

<sup>7</sup> Ribino, P. (2023). The role of politeness in human–machine interactions: A systematic literature review and future perspectives. Artificial Intelligence Review, 56(51), 445–482. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10462-023-10540-1>

<sup>8</sup> Amazon Alexa to reward kids who say: ”Please.” (2018, April 25). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-43897516>