



Courtesy Google

# Hey Google! Can You Teach My Kid Some Manners...Please? »

Smart home devices have many advantages, but are they turning our children into brats?

By Bethany Braun-Silva

“Just Google it,” my husband said when, last year, I asked him what day of the week Christmas fell on. Before I could whip out my phone and start typing, I heard my 5-year-old say, “Hey Google, what day is Christmas this year?”

This is our life these days. We were recently gifted a Google Assistant, or Google Home device, an internet-connected speaker that does everything from play music to sync our calendars to answer any question, no matter how random. Within seconds Google replies with an answer, and we are on to the next thing. No “thank you” needed—it is, after all, a virtual assistant that’s plugged into our wall. But it didn’t escape me that if my husband had answered the question, I would have at least tossed a “Thanks, babe,” his way.

This got me thinking about my kids. They are absolute sponges, picking up new phrases and mannerisms every day—from TV shows, videos on their iPad, and me and my husband. I, of course, want them to be polite and considerate kids who grow up to be

polite and considerate adults. I started to wonder: Should I make them say “thank you” to the tech device that sits on top of our family desk? Amazon’s Alexa, Google Home, and Apple’s Siri will answer any question regardless of whether it’s asked politely. Kids can even be intentionally rude to the device, calling it a “jerk” or “stupid,” with no repercussions of hurt feelings or a scolding from Mom or Dad. However, it is a device, not a person, so I find myself torn on this issue.

## Technology and Our Society

I’ve heard many times throughout the years that technology is ruining our social interactions. In fact, it’s contributing to the lack of empathy we see online—especially with kids and teens.

“When social media relationships replace real-time, real-life, in-person human relationships, problems arise...That’s because when interacting with others from behind a keyboard, the communication rules are different—easier...You can say what you

want without having to witness firsthand the emotional fallout of poor choices or unkind words, even those that are misspoken,” according to “Is Technology Dehumanizing Our Society?,” an article published on dialogmagazine.com.

This lack of human interaction is the norm these days. Internet trolls run rampant. I hardly know anyone who prefers talking on the phone rather than texting. And now, with these in-home devices, tech is literally everywhere. But even if this is the norm, should it be?

## The Pros

Paulina R., a mom from Forest Hills, isn’t too worried about the social side effects that smart home devices may have on her kids. “The benefits far outweigh the potential drawbacks,” she says. “My kids use our Alexa like a modern-day library. They absorb so much information from that little machine, it’s incredible.”

Meanwhile, Manhattan mom Vanessa McDaniels has found another advantage to her family’s Google Home device. “When my two boys get into an argument over who wants the iPad or who gets to pick the family movie, we ask Google to flip a coin,” she says. Arguments are settled in mere seconds, which makes for a much more peaceful household.

Similarly, many parents of children with special needs praise virtual assistants such as Alexa and Google Assistant. “While on the one hand kids using Alexa may develop an attitude, there are also ways that creators, such as myself, are using Alexa to help children lead better lives,” says Daphne Mallory, a virtual reality screenwriter and producer. She recently developed the Alexa skill Autism Help, which is designed to help parents teach social, verbal, and functional skills to children with autism. “It may be easier and less stressful for children on the autism spectrum to interact with Alexa and learn skills, than solely with a parent or other adult,” she explains. “That’s the benefit of voice interface technology and how we can use Alexa in a positive way.”

## The Cons

Even with the best of intentions, though, parents can find themselves at odds with their kids’ behavior when it comes to these devices. McDaniels is a bit worried about how their smart device may affect the way her children act outside the house. “The Google Home device answers our kids whether they are rude or not,” she says. “I’m concerned that this might get repeated with a family member or even a teacher one day.” And McDaniels recently caught her 6-year-old son Connor hitting the device when it didn’t understand his question. “We talked to him about his behavior and explained that that’s not how we treat things in our house,” she says. “But there was this thought in the back of my head that even though this behavior is totally unacceptable, we were essentially talking about something inanimate.”

There’s also the issue of safety. Who’s to say these devices can’t get hacked or steal personal information? Certainly if a smart device resides in your kids’ room, there might be some cause for concern when it comes to privacy.

“Google’s activities may affect the ads you get, the deals you are exposed to, the purchases you make, the discounts you receive, the entertainment and news you see, and your very sense that surveillance is natural. Plus, Google is only one of a gaggle of large companies involved in these sorts of activities—all the while seemingly hoping we don’t understand and are too resigned to push back,” writes Joseph Turow in an article titled “Google Still Doesn’t Care About Your Privacy” on fortune.com.

## Manners and the Machine

So, is there a risk of these smart home devices making kids less empathetic—or even more demanding?

“Devices are not turning kids into brats. Devices are merely tools,” says Donna Volpitta, Ed.D., founder of the Center for Resilient Leadership and a former special education teacher. “However, with the increase in technology and devices, parents need to be more and more mindful about the way they are parenting. Currently, there is a wide misuse of these devices, which puts kids at risk in many ways, including being at risk of becoming brats.”

Lilian Rincon, product management director for the Google Assistant, is being more mindful by changing how she speaks to the assistant. “In my house, we say things like, ‘Ok Google, please tell me the weather’ and try to remember to say ‘thank you’ when we get the answer. We don’t always remember, and it’s definitely a balance, but I think my kids learn from how we talk to the assistant, and it has made an impact,” she says. “There’s always some level of risk with new technology and children learning about it at younger and younger ages, but as a parent I can model the behavior I want them to replicate, similar to how we do in real relationships with people.”

Paulina takes a similar approach to ensuring her kids learn manners: “That’s something they will learn from my husband and me, and I don’t think my kids will grow up to be rude just from using Alexa,” she says. “Teaching manners is the parent’s job, and we need to adapt our parenting to these modern times.”

Dr. Volpitta also suggests using the following tips to stop kids’ bratty behavior toward the devices—and toward other people:

- **Set limits and stick to them:** It is our job, as parents, to establish and enforce rules and boundaries, and it’s our children’s job (whether we like it or not) to test those rules and boundaries. If you see your child pushing the limits as far as rude behavior is concerned, step in and explain why that behavior is unacceptable. If the behavior was toward a smart device, remove the device to be used another time. If it was directed at a person, have them apologize.
- **Enforce privilege guidelines:** Using any kind of technology for fun is a privilege, not a right. “When kids are acting responsibly, they are able to earn privileges and use devices. When they are being brats, they should not be able to use devices,” Dr. Volpitta says.
- **Show you won’t give in to whining:** Kids should accept the consequences of acting in a negative manner toward the devices, so stand your ground if your child starts to whine or bargain to use the virtual assistant before they’ve earned the privilege again.

So like everything in our tech-crazy world, in-home devices come with pros and cons. My kids will continue to emulate what they see and hear, so my husband and I will start saying “please” and “thank you” to our Google Assistant to set a good example. Though while my kids were out of the house the other day, I did ask it a bunch of questions, both appropriate and inappropriate—in the name of research, of course. One was, “Hey Google, what makes you happy?” It replied, “I’m happy when I can help out.” Maybe the device can teach my kids some manners after all.