

# Art & Entertainment

## Heirs and graces

Concerned about your kids' feral feeding habits? *Kate Birch* is on her best behaviour for a **Youth Etiquette course**



You know what it's like. You treat yourselves to a well-deserved family meal out only to have it spoiled by burping, slurping, flying food and aeroplane elbows. Your posse wouldn't look out of place at a chimps' tea party and, frankly, something ought to be done.

Help is at hand. In a mock restaurant set up in Knowledge Village, a group of international children (from Pakistani and Emirati to Canadian) is embarking on a Youth Etiquette course, with this module focused on table manners.

An elegant, pearl-wearing, patent-pumped woman strides confidently into the room, announcing: 'I'm here to see my girls'. Suddenly I feel 13 again, back in my Victorian-style etiquette classes. I sit up straight, swallow my gum and stop talking.

'The focus is on how to behave in this society,' explains Nour Roumieh, who offers sessions for children aged from seven years, imparting values such as honesty, respect and responsibility in a step-by-step method. 'Dubai is a blend of nationalities, making it essential to understand and respect cultural differences,' says Nour, who has taken etiquette courses in Switzerland.

From how to sit posture-perfect ('straight back, napkin on lap') to what to do with dirty napkins when finished ('leave to the left of plate'),

Nour's gentle but firm instruction is comprehensive.

'We teach international standards, both American and European, depending on parents' requests,' explains Nour. 'For example, the American style (holding the fork in the left hand until the food is cut, then switching it to the right to eat) suits Islamic families, due to their use mainly of the right hand.'

Watching Nour work, I can't help but behave myself. My posture is erect and I'm sipping my coffee with my pinky finger out. Nour promptly informs me that this is 'terribly snobbish and we don't advocate such gestures.' I sit corrected, in more ways than one.

Nour introduces a three-course child-friendly menu, with all the accoutrements necessary for polishing young diners' behaviour, while constantly dishing out dos and don'ts. 'Elbows in, knuckles up, fork and knife down...'

'I like nuggets,' declares Amani, seven, putting into practice advice about politely sharing one's preferences.

The children are taught how to eat 'difficult' or special foods too, such as soup, avocado ('with a teaspoon') spaghetti and asparagus, and even learn the complications of cracking a crab. I'm impressed. And 12-year-old Georgia's cupping of a lemon quarter to avoid spraying juice on to her dining companion puts me to shame.

Nour brings to her pupils' attention the ultimate *faux pas* in Middle Eastern manners: eating, touching or serving food with your left hand. Then there's a brief detour to China, with a practical demonstration of chopsticks. While Georgia confronts chopsticks with confidence ('I've used them in restaurants before') the technique proves frustratingly elusive for the other girls. Eating soup proves even more problematic – and that's just for me.

'You sip soup from the tip of an oval spoon and from the side of a soup spoon,' says Nour when I attempt it. 'Your spoon is full; it should be only half full, like Mily's,' she says, pointing to the nine-year-old next to me.

Mily, clearly pleased with herself, delicately dabs her mouth with her napkin, before beginning a discussion of ballet. Nour is delighted, having already covered the art of making polite conversation between mouthfuls.

Mily isn't the only one to rise to the occasion. Amani handles her cutlery with flair, executing a textbook fork-to-mouth manoeuvre that draws admiration from her teacher, although the effect is marred by an over-enthusiastic rubbing of her mouth with the napkin. 'We always blot darling, never rub,' Nour says, raising a well-groomed eyebrow before turning her attention to seven-year-old Imaan, caught red-handed holding her glass by the rim. 'Oops,' Imaan says, smiling impishly, quickly rectifying her mistake by delicately removing her finger smudges

from the rim with her napkin. Whatever the choice of beverage there is one cardinal rule: 'Always sip – never gulp, hold the glass by the base and put it down between sips.' Nour delivers her instructions with elegance and efficiency, while remaining friendly and unpatronising, as one would expect from a master of manners.

From laying a table correctly to drinking a glass of water, all bases are covered in this etiquette class and, by the end of the session, the children seem entirely at home surrounded by assorted glasses, cups, plates and cutlery, and profess to have enjoyed the class. 'I've learned to do all the right things at the right times and how to eat properly,' says a proud Imaan.

Respecting standards of politeness and awareness can make a huge difference, says Nour. 'To get on in life, you don't need just maths and English, you need confidence and a correct code of behaviour. Children well-versed in the social graces have an advantage in the work world, helping them become independent and respected.'

The manners masterclass comes to an end but the lessons don't stop there. Nour can teach the basics but it's what parents do at home that matters: 'They are the role models and children will copy them.' I've been told.

*The Youth Etiquette Programme (kids seven to 12) offers two modules: Mind Your Manners and Table Manners; each lasts four weeks (Dhs1,850 for both) with sessions every Saturday.*

