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Alexa, Where Are Your Manners?

By Nadja Streiter, LMSW

AT A GLANCE

Before bringing new technology into your home consider potential unintended consequences • In this article our expert asks if Alexa (and other digital assistants) are teaching our children that it's acceptable to be rude and demanding in our interactions with others



According to recent surveys from Nielsen more than 30% of U.S. households (about 66.4 million) have voice-based home assistants, also known as smart speakers or digital assistants. Many homes have multiple such devices that are being used to make day-to-day living and parenting easier. In fact, many young parents report believing that it is better to have their children entertained by Alexa than to put them in front of a screen.

There are clearly numerous conveniences and good uses for voice-based digital assistants. For example, I use Alexa to set timers while I'm cooking. Sure I could do it on my microwave or on my phone, but it's more sanitary to call out, "Alexa, set a timer for 10 minutes" when I'm handling raw chicken. It's also the quickest way to check the weather or leave a reminder for someone to feed the dog without having to lift a hand. But let's not fool ourselves: All these conveniences come with a price.

When we bring new technology into our homes we have to think about the implications and unintended consequences.

Because every family is unique, the impact of new technology may differ from home to home, but the questions we should be asking ourselves are generally the same. For example, in the case of digital assistants, an important question is what are the potential impacts of these devices on our children's language, manners, and interactions.

INTERACTING WITH AI

I received Alexa as a gift last year. When Alexa first arrived in my home it took me a while to learn to stop saying "please" or "thank you" when she answered my question or performed a task. Wait a minute...what? Learn *not to say* please and thank you? Most parents spend years teaching their kids *to say* these words! I admit I found myself a little uncomfortable and a little confused. Imagine what this is like for a child, especially one who may struggle with appropriate social interactions.

Child-development experts are beginning to express concerns about the impact interacting with Artificial Intelligence (AI) has on kids. First there is the issue of language. Children who grow up in homes with voice-based home assistants have to learn the device's way of interacting, which is usually devoid of manners and nuance and is heavily weighted toward demands.

Although this may change in the future it's safe to say that at this point, Alexa and other smart speakers do not enhance a child's conversational ability (in fact, it may have the opposite effect), nor do they teach skills necessary for positive and healthy human interaction such as politeness, respect, and reciprocity.

WHAT BEHAVIOR ARE YOU MODELING?

All this leads me to wonder if ongoing use of digital servants that don't require good manners will have a negative long-term impact on our youth. Will we see a rise in rudeness? Some might say, we're seeing that already.

I learned I didn't need to say please or thank you or even care about my tone of voice. Without any repercussions, I can be demanding or rude to my disembodied servant in ways that would be unacceptable to another human.

Given that the majority of digital assistant owners are in their prime child-rearing years, does that behavior serve as a negative role model for children learning the intricacies of appropriate social interaction? We might not have to wait long to find out: Some parents justify barking orders and lack of manners by explaining, "it's a machine, it doesn't have feelings." That however presents a dilemma when their teen curses at Alexa. And trust me, teens and tweens find cursing at Alexa quite entertaining; parents on the other hand, not so much.

All of this technology is so new that we don't yet have enough data to do more than speculate about the long-term implications of smart speakers or digital home assistants. But I encourage you to think about the possibilities as you consider how to use it. Even though it doesn't matter to Alexa, I've gone back to "please" and "thank you" because it matters to me.

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