

Say thank you and please: Should you be polite with Alexa and the Google Assistant?

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Jeremy Bloom has a polite family. But after a few frustratingly failed attempts in which Bloom politely asked Alexa to turn down the volume at dinner time, he shouted instead, "Alexa, zip it."

"To our surprise, the music immediately stopped," says the Pittsburgh-area commercial lender. "We got a huge laugh out of that. And while not the best lesson in manners for the kids, it is common for us to tell Alexa to 'zip it' now."

As we increasingly rely on anthropomorphized artificial intelligence-powered voice assistants in our homes or in our hands for weather, news, homework help and such, there's a question of whether these machines deserve the respect we (hopefully) afford fellow human beings.

In other words, should we use words such as "please" and "sorry" when we ask Amazon's Alexa, the Google Assistant or Apple's Siri to do something on our behalf—or follow up with a "thank you" when the devices deliver on our requests? And if we're bratty with Alexa and the others, what does that not only teach our kids but say about our own level of civility?

Dr. Laura Phillips, a clinical neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute, says the answers are "complicated and really nuanced."

A report last year by the U.K.-based market research firm Childwise suggested that voice recognition gadgets could be teaching children to be rude and demanding, and that "the dividing line between digital 'person' and a real human being might not be clear for children."

Some parents have been struggling to find the right tone.

"This has really made me think about people versus inanimate objects versus pets versus simulated intelligence," says Deidré McLaren, mother of a 4-year-old in Johannesburg, South Africa.

For Cynthia Craigie, a stay-at-home mother of three in the central coast of California, it is all about what the kids hear.

"How do you interact with your spouse? How do you interact with the cashier at the convenience store? Do you say 'please' and 'thank you,' or are you on your phone, distracted when you go through the checkout line? Those [little things](#), I've noticed my boys pay attention to and will copy my actions. Manners can be considered a lost art."

But another parent, Tawnya Slater, sees it differently. Watching manners with these devices is to her, in a word, "weird." "You want me to say 'please' to my electronic device? Should I say 'thank you' to my trash can for accepting my trash? How about I ask the freezer to please keep my ice cream frozen," she shared in a Facebook group discussing the topic.

What makes things more complicated is that "digital assistants have this aura of authority," says Dr. Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychological Research Center in Newport Beach, California. We may know that they're not human, but to kids, "they sound like adults, know lots of stuff and are easy to anthropomorphize." As conversational interfaces and AI evolves further, such distinctions may blur further.

"Kids learn through repetition, which is why we all say, 'What's the magic word?' infinitum," she says.

"These AI-driven, non-human entities don't care if you sound tired and crabby, or if you are purposely rude because it's 'funny.' But interactions

of all kinds build patterns of communication and interaction. The more you are used to bossing Siri around or bullying her, the more you're used to that communication pattern," Rutledge says.

Some parents have reported another problem with trying to sound friendly and considerate when talking to Alexa and Google—throwing in extra words when barking out a command may confuse these assistants.

Dr. Phillips has another concern. The use of "please" and "thank you" might, in some sense, cheapen the meaning of such words.

"When you're talking to very young infants who don't understand it's a machine and we want them to hear kind engagement with other people, it stands to reason that we should be using manners," says Phillips.

"When kids are older and understand that Alexa isn't a person, we don't want them to use those words in an automatic way. And that we say 'thank you' and 'I'm sorry' and 'please' because there's a relational piece to our communication and our words impact other people."

Getting positive reinforcement

Amazon determined that politeness counts when it introduced the Echo Dot Kids Edition last year. When youngsters ask Alexa to solve a math problem by exhibiting good manners—"Alexa, please tell me what 5 plus 7 is"—the voice inside the Echo will not only supply the right answer but will then add positive reinforcement: "By the way, thanks for asking so nicely."

This "magic word" feature, as Amazon called it, was an apparent response by the company to a loud chorus of customers who were concerned that the act of rudely commanding Alexa to do something sent out the wrong kind of message, especially to the youngest members of the family.

Google launched a similar "Pretty Please" feature for the Google Assistant last fall after director of product management for the Assistant Lilian Rincon saw her then 4-year-old son yelling at the devices to play the ABCs and eventually his favorite Disney songs.

"I quickly realized that we needed a way to help promote polite behavior—not only for kids but also for all people who now welcome digital assistants to their homes," she says.

In Iowa City, senior marketing manager Dana Turner says her husband has come up with another sound reason for treating [voice assistants](#) nicely. He "always says 'thank you' to her because, he says, one day AI is going to take over the world and he wants to be saved."

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