Other adults taking over when parents fail to teach manners

By Matt Richtel, New York Times

It’s dinnertime, and 6-year-old Joaquin Hurtado is staying in his seat. He hasn’t stood up, run around the table or wrestled with his little brother. Good thing. It wouldn’t take much unruly behavior to shatter the dishware or the mood in this upscale restaurant.

“This is a place where you come to eat,” the boy says softly, explaining nice manners. “It’s not a place to play.”

The place is Chenery Park, a restaurant with low lights, cloth napkins, $24 grilled salmon and “family night” every Tuesday. Children are welcome, with a catch: They are expected to behave — and to watch their manners, or learn them. Think upscale dining with training wheels.

Chenery Park has many allies in the fight to teach manners to a new generation of children. Around the country, there are classes taught by self-appointed etiquette counselors — Emily Posts for a new age — delivering a more decentralized and less formal approach to teaching manners than in years past. A few restaurants, like Chenery Park, and high-end hotels set aside space and time for families.

These etiquette experts say that new approaches are needed because parents no longer have the stomach, time or know-how to play bad cop and teach manners. Dinnertime has become a free-for-all in many households, with packed family schedules, the television on in the background and a modern-day belief of many parents that they should simply let children be children.

Some of these manners-minders acknowledge that they can sound like curmudgeons, just another generation of older folks

mourning the lost habits of more refined times. But they also say that parents welcome their efforts as a way of outsourcing the hard work of teaching youngsters to follow rules.

During a recent family night at Chenery Park, Joseph Kowal, an owner, roamed among the regulars and newcomers, saying hello and occasionally playing parental ally. He's got a twinkle in his eye but a steely commitment to having children — even if they're not etiquette role models — at least sit politely and not scream or throw food.

"Some parents will say, 'Uncle Joe's going to come up here, and he's going to be cross with you,'" Kowal said. "They use that to their advantage." He recalled one child who wouldn't settle down, and he threatened to tape the child's mouth. The child told him to go ahead and try.

"I went to my office, got some blue painter's tape, came back and ripped a piece off," he said. The kid piped down. "The parents looked at me like, 'We're going to try that at home.'"

All of which raises some intriguing questions: Is it Joe who brings out the best in his young patrons? Or something else? And what are the best strategies for training children to be polite, to pay attention to the world around them, whether they are in dim lighting with fragile dishware or at home?

Etiquette teachers, other parents and people who spend time thinking about how and why we mind our manners have some interesting ideas about new strategies.

"These days, you have to teach kids about return on investment," said Robin Wells, the founder of Etiquette Manor in Coral Gables, Fla., which holds classes on etiquette for adults and children. When it comes to children, she said, long gone are the days when you could tell them that they have to behave a certain way "just because."

So, even as she imparts lessons about using forks and the

importance of looking the waiter in the eye, she does so by framing the lessons in a constructively selfish way for the children. She often exhorts her young students: be polite to your mother because she'll be happier, and if she's happier, you're happier.

On the first day of her five one-hour sessions, which cost $285, she tells the children to go home and do one unexpectedly kind thing so that they can see how wide-eyed and impressed their parents will be. "It's almost manipulation at its finest," she said.

Then she starts in with the knives and forks, and the proper way to address an adult or a waiter. On the last day of class, they attend a three-course meal at an upscale restaurant. (Among her lessons: she slams a clunky landline phone on the table and asks children if that seems O.K. No, she responds, so don't put your cellphone on the table either.)

Around the country, hundreds of entrepreneurs teach versions of etiquette and manners classes, said Elena Neitlich, the founder of Moms On Edge, a company, with offices in Osprey, Fla., that offers online certification for manners teachers through a course called Etiquette Moms, at prices ranging from $250 to $1,250.

She believes that teaching manners to children has grown more challenging, and necessary, in part because of technology.

"Kids have stopped making eye contact at one another," Neitlich said. "They bring their technology to the table. She added that it is true of parents, too: "Everyone is in a hurry. Things are clipped, clipped, clipped."

It all makes teaching manners at home challenging, said Faye de Muyshondt, the founder of Socialsklz, which teaches workshops in New York City on etiquette and social skills. Modern children seem to want no part of the conversation, she said.

“Say the words ‘manners’ or ‘etiquette’ to kids these days, and they run the other direction,” she said. She prefers teaching the children that they are “building the brand called ‘you.’”

“People don’t want to eat with someone whose plate looks like a science project,” she tells the children in her workshops. “If you want to be invited back on a play date,” she explains, be polite.

She thinks that one key aspect of her workshops, which take place in schools or with Brownie troops, is that they don’t happen in the home or at the dinner table. “The casual nature of the home makes it difficult,” she said, adding that most children she talks to say that their families have the television on during dinner.

Indeed, she and other experts talked repeatedly about setting, and how it affects manners and behavior.

It turns out that this concept is connected to science from a group of seemingly unrelated researchers: criminologists. They look at what is happening at a place like Chenery Park through a very different lens called ecological psychology, or its subset, broken-windows theory. It suggests that when an environment is dilapidated, it gives permission to people to misbehave. When the proverbial windows are not broken, neither is the behavior, or so the theory goes.

“A fancy restaurant gives off so many cues that this is a place for refined behavior,” said Ralph B. Taylor, a professor of criminal justice at Temple University who studies how environments influence behavior. And he and other people in the field say that the environment changes not just the youngsters. “The parents are changed,” he added. “You’re not talking loud; you’re not yacking on the cellphone. Everybody is with the program.”

Taylor and other experts said that parents can take some of

the ecological psychology lessons from places like Chenery Park.

“Take parts of the restaurant home with you,” he advised. Use a tablecloth or nice napkins to simulate the environment that changed children’s behavior. He suggested also introducing children to other environments – like highbrow concerts or museums.

Wells, the Florida manners teacher, made a similar point: take a child to the window of a nice restaurant, look inside and ask how people are behaving and what the child loves about the scene.

And when you bring the well-mannered rules back into your own home, don’t do it every night, counseled de Muyshondt, of Socialsklz.

“You turn into a nag,” she said. Given the less formal nature of our society, she suggested creating a “bridge” through periodic training, like one formal night a week.

On a recent night at Chenery Park, Joaquin, the well-behaved 6-year-old, sat in the upstairs dining area near the front, eating pasta with butter and Parmesan cheese. He was joined by his brother, Sisto, 4, eating a Hebrew National hot dog, one of the handful of inexpensive kid-friendly Tuesday night menu items, and their two mothers.

One of them, Arcelia Hurtado, said that the family regularly goes to Chenery Park, largely because the adults want a nice meal. But it’s a bonus that the boys think about being in “an adult space.” At home, Hurtado said, dinnertime is chaos.

“There’s something about the physical setting” of the restaurant, she said. “They see the cloth napkins, and they know to put them in their laps.” She sometimes has to tell them to remember to behave. “I kind of feel an obligation for kids to behave well, since Joe is doing this nice thing for

us.”

Kowal, who does not have children of his own, grew up in Rhode Island in a family that wasn’t super strict, he said, but did require children to be polite. He started his family nights after the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 — initially because business was slow on Tuesdays, but then it evolved as a popular training ground. The restaurant’s website says, “We’re here to help kids learn proper ways of eating in nicer restaurants with Mom and Dad.”

Kowal himself can sometimes come across as hurried and even brusque. He has been known to scold parents, too. He once reprimanded a woman for talking on her phone and ignoring her son, who was yelling loudly. The woman was offended and told Kowal she wouldn’t be going back. He responded that that was her choice, and the people at nearby tables applauded.

Another night, two families were sitting at adjoining tables. At one of them, a 5-year-old starting yelling and jumping up and down.

“The second or third time it happened, one of the kids at the other table goes over to the one jumping up and down and said, ‘You can’t do that,’” Kowal recalled. “That was the best.”