



What Afternoon Tea Teaches Our Children

Text and Photograph by Angela Renals

As with any family affair or special meal, children at afternoon tea have the opportunity to observe and imitate their elders and practice their own manners. Some tearooms welcome children of all ages, while others request a minimum age for guests. Even if the kids are getting their first exposure to afternoon tea at home using their children's tea set, afternoon tea is the perfect teacher for these life lessons:

A GRACIOUS HOST PLANS WELL

By menu planning and/or setting the tea table with an adult, kids begin learning about anticipating their guests' needs. Talk through the afternoon tea meal with your child, asking them to help you list tableware and groceries you'll need to serve tea and your chosen menu. Kids will see the reward of preparing thoroughly before guests arrive: their guests will have a great time while they themselves are able to relax and visit with their company during party time.

MANNERS MATTER

Learning afternoon tea and teacup etiquette, especially why we bother with it, reinforces the importance of good manners in general. Rather than thinking of etiquette as stuffy or outmoded, practicing good manners at afternoon tea can help children experience the boost in self-confidence that comes when you feel accustomed to the social rules of a particular situation. There is no better reinforcement to convince the kids that manners matter than when a passing adult stops to compliment the kids for behaving politely at afternoon tea.

GET COMFORTABLE GETTING FANCY

While some kids delight at any excuse to don their finest gowns and suits, others need encouraging. It's understandable, especially as our society becomes increasingly informal, which makes afternoon tea even more valuable as a teaching tool today. Knowing appropriate dress for different settings and becoming comfortable dressing up can help our children navigate a variety of social situations with confidence as they go out into the world. The first time a child enters a tearoom where everyone is looking fabulous, they will experience firsthand that how we dress can also help make an occasion feel special.

WE HANDLE PRECIOUS THINGS WITH CARE

Especially as they are developing dexterity and control over their motor skills, children at afternoon tea are in the classroom, even if they don't know it. We can explain why Grandma's china is very special and that we, therefore, handle it very carefully. If you don't think your little one is ready yet for the fine china, there are many food-safe (make sure of this) porcelain, plastic, and metal tea sets

for kids. Encourage them to pour the tea and to try not to spill it, but don't make a big deal when they do. You might fill one-cup teapots for wee ones to manage successfully.

PATIENCE HAS ITS REWARDS

Afternoon tea is a leisurely meal with three courses and many cups of tea. Children will see we take our time to appreciate the ambiance of the tearoom, beautiful table settings, and first sips of fragrant teas while we await the presentation of the three-tiered tray. Scrumptious things come to those who wait, and as the anticipation builds, we can explain how much effort, time, and creativity go into the preparation of the menu.

SHARING SPREADS JOY

At afternoon tea where each guest chooses their own pot of tea, it is very common for friends to intentionally order different teas around the table. Children will see that when everyone shares their teas, everyone enjoys the opportunity to taste several delicious teas in one sitting. They will have the chance to feel both the joy of giving—offering their chosen tea to others—and the gratitude of receiving, accepting a taste of another's tea.

THE CONVERSATION IS THE THING

Afternoon tea is a phone-free oasis in the midst of our digitally obsessed world. Given that so many American children have regular access to screens from infancy, afternoon tea is a much-needed opportunity for kids to practice their interpersonal conversational skills in a face-to-face setting. While they may need parental enforcement to stay off devices at the tea table, they will afterwards remember how much fun they had without their device during teatime. Without the distraction of their phones, they have the chance to see firsthand that chatting, listening, and laughing are all the entertainment tea friends need.

LIFE'S GREATEST DELIGHTS CAN COME IN SMALL PACKAGES

Bigger is not always better, something kids will learn as they make their way through the afternoon tea menu. Chefs that create tiny whimsical garnishes demonstrate to children that small details can make a big impression. Small savory and sweet bites allow us to try many different recipes without getting too stuffed at afternoon tea. Each finger food is its own tasty delight, and especially during the third course, mini-sized desserts allow us to indulge ourselves while preventing sugar overload—perhaps a benefit appreciated more by the parents, if the kids are young.

TIME SPENT TOGETHER IS A GIFT

When a child joins family or friends at the tea table, he or she likely will not at first understand how important

and beautiful this moment is, but that will not prevent them from gaining something from it. Just listening to the conversation flow around them, children will learn many things about their family, their culture, or their own history. They will see how good friends support, hear, and cheer one another. Perhaps this is the greatest lesson on this list.

Over time, the wonder of afternoon tea becomes part of happy childhood memories, and whether or not the kids become afternoon-tea enthusiasts, the core life lessons stay with them. In our family, our eldest, when she was in grade school, began asking for afternoon tea with Aunt Beth as her birthday treat. Our second eldest taught younger Girl Scouts how to properly brew tea. Our son knows that gentlemen are always welcome at afternoon tea, though lately he prefers Dad time while we are at tea. Our youngest, when her friend comes over, gets busy preparing an afternoon tea for the two to enjoy. And as a work in progress, we continually revisit and practice appropriate dress and our hosting and table manners. If all goes to plan, afternoon tea will remain a family tradition for generations to come until it is my turn to represent the elder generation at the tea table and gently show my grandbabies how we enjoy afternoon tea with grace and graciousness.

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