took the form of letting kids step all over the feelings of other children if their own feelings so compelled them, as when a mother in suburban Maryland explained to me that she let her little girl cancel playdates right up to the last minute because she “couldn’t force her” to engage in social commitments that now bored her. It never seemed to dawn upon the mother that her child’s passing boredom was less important than the other child’s potentially hurt feelings; and that teaching her daughter to think of the other child’s feelings would, in the long term, be better for them both.

This lack of parental empathy was brought home to me much more recently, when a mom in my then eighth grader’s class complained to me about an incident in which another girl in the class had had a panic attack — a full-blown panic attack — just as the doors closed on the bus that was to take the class on a camping trip. Without a word of sympathy, the mom vented to me, “Like [my daughter] really needed to see that.”

This lack of compassion and empathy, I’ve found, is rampant in today’s hypercompetitive parenting culture in which almost every child is eternally being groomed to look out for No. 1, cheered on by parents who view other children more as potential impediments to his or her full flowering than as comrades-in-arms — or friends — united in the difficult task of gracefully growing up. As American parents, we parrot a certain amount of knee-jerk politeness, urging our kids to say “please” and “thank you,” but I don’t necessarily have the sense that all this is aimed at doing anything more profound than making our kids (and ourselves, by extension) look good.

A more deeper understanding of courtesy — that we do things like make eye contact and say hello and goodbye because such behaviors convey to other people that they matter and are worthy of respect — is all but entirely absent from our parenting culture today. It’s far more important to us that our children be in touch with their feelings and true to themselves than that they create good feeling around them through “superficial” good manners.

An old-fashioned French online guide to proper comportment shoots down that very modern way of thinking, which many view as an encroaching threat in France as well: “Philosophers may say that politeness is the greatest form of hypocrisy,” it states. “But if saying hello, apologizing, thanking, helping those in need, being attentive to others, are signs of hypocrisy, then we accept that epithet, and can offer no defense.”