

In America, even the rich kids feel the need to feed correctly

Wealthy US citizens are also sending their young to classes in dinner party etiquette, says
ADAM FRESCO

LOOKING EVERY inch a successful American boardroom executive, Spencer finished his lunch of sautéed salmon before carefully lifting his champagne glass in a toast to the other diners.

Dressed in a blue blazer, white shirt and dark trousers, he thanked them for coming and signalled the waiters strategically placed around the private dining room to serve the dessert.

A typical scene at an executive lunch. But Spencer is only 9, about the same age as his dining companions, who are dressed to the nines. He and his sister McKenzie, 10, along with three boys and five girls, had got a place in an etiquette class at the exclusive Bel Air hotel in Beverly Hills, California.

The crash courses in polite, or some may say precocious, behaviour are held four times a year, and the waiting list stretches to next summer as Hollywood executives, actors and CEOs from around America try desperately to get their children on it.

The youngsters learn how to behave when faced with the sort of situation in which the well-heeled may find themselves, including how to introduce their parents to the Queen or the Pope.

The Petit Protocol class was given by Diane Diehl, known as the Miss Manners of international etiquette.

At this class were, among others, Juliet, 8, granddaughter of Berry Gordy Jr, the creator of Motown, Joaquin, 6, the son of an actor who appeared in *Gladiator* and *The Bourne Supremacy*, and the children of a powerful Hollywood agent. Oh, and my daughters Abigail, 10, and eight-year-old Sophie, who got in because of their "cute" English accents.

Diehl, the daughter of a top-ranking military officer, travels the world teaching business leaders how to behave abroad, but included



Children at the Bel Air hotel, Los Angeles, with Diane Diehl at the petit protocol class

youngsters after being begged to do so by parents who did not have time to hammer home the finer points of behaving.

One of her first customers was a wealthy New York executive who rarely got to eat with his son because of work commitments. When he did so, the boy's table manners disgusted him so much that he booked the etiquette class that day, and within a few weeks his son was whizzing his way to the East Coast.

First lesson at the Bel Air was how to present your parents to the Queen. One child wore the crown while two others played daughter and mother.

Then there was a lesson on what to say if a telephone caller wants to speak to your parents when they are away for several months, leaving you with the nanny and the staff. Never give out personal information when someone calls, says Diehl; tell the caller that your parents are unavailable and take a message.

One girl, misunderstanding the example, put up her hand and said that if she does not know the identity of a caller, she just looks at one of the CCTV monitors in her

home. Sitting in rows of four, the children were well behaved and well dressed, and seemed to understand the finer points of the early lessons. One girl, who was attending the class for the third time, was wearing a fur stole and a pink, 1950s-style dress, and had French polish on her toes. Sitting with her legs crossed at the ankles, she

'These kids will be more comfortable and become more charismatic'

looked as though she already hosted her own dinner parties.

The lesson on how to write a thank-you letter revealed that several of the class had personalised stationery. Spencer proudly told the class that he had his own wax stamp from England with S on it.

Robyn Allyn, Spencer's mother, said that she wanted her children to feel comfortable in formal settings. Allyn, whose husband is a personal manager to the stars, said: "We have always eaten out in fine restaurants that

have multiple knives and forks on the table, so it is good for them to know what to do. It can never hurt to know how to behave."

The children were taught how to use a napkin, hold a glass of wine and how to cut food.

Diehl looks to Britain for examples of good behaviour, believing that manners have declined in recent years in America because of the lack of respectable role models.

"The English wrote the book on civility," she says, "and these lessons are about having respect for other people. As children become more comfortable with their surroundings, so they will become more charismatic."

"This was an exceptionally good class. The boys always come dragging their feet, but end up enjoying it. Our office receives calls from parents around the country desperate for their children to attend."

Does the course work? Since the class, my children remember more often to take their elbows off the table. And on the flight home a Virgin stewardess said that I had the politest children she had ever seen. I stopped them from telling her about the classes. "Years of hard work," I said.