

How to Practice Gratitude & Improve Your Family's Mental Health

By: Datta Munshi MD, FAAP

As parents, we want to provide our children with a sense of consistency and normalcy during times of uncertainty, fear and change. That's not always easy.

During stressful times, we may not always be able to change the reality of the moment. However, we **can** focus our energies on "controlling what we can control" and practicing gratitude for the events—no matter how small—that enrich our days.



The habit of gratitude can help us get off the treadmill of everyday life and acknowledge the small victories that we all have every single day.

Reasons to be thankful: the health benefits

A growing number of studies have looked at the impact of gratitude on our overall well-being. The results show benefits to both our physical and emotional health, including happiness (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10902-019-00188-6>) in children. Luckily, gratitude can be added to our daily routines without increasing our "to-do" and "to-learn" lists.

Beyond thanks: 5 ways to nurture gratitude in children

Teaching polite manners, such as saying "thank you," isn't the only way to promote gratitude in children. Here are some tips to help build a habit of gratitude in your children.

- 1 Focus on what went "right" each day.** Take a couple of minutes at bedtime to write down or talk about at least one thing, no matter how small, or one part of the day that you and your family are grateful for. Consider collecting them in a family "gratitude jar." Studies show that gratitude improves sleep quality (</English/healthy-living/sleep/Pages/Sleep-and-Mental-Health.aspx>) and decreases symptoms like unexplained aches and pains. By focusing on the positive parts of the day, gratitude promotes a positive outlook.
- 2. Don't save conversations about gratitude for Thanksgiving.** Whether driving back home or enjoying a family game night, talking about the people you are grateful for in your life—and why—can go a long way. Think about positive traits in others that make us feel grounded, loved and give us a sense of security. Reminding ourselves of those high-quality relationships can help us manage anxious and sad thoughts more effectively.
- 3. Promote sincere verbal or written expressions of thankfulness.** You're your children build a habit of thankful expression. Thanking others (<https://www.cdc.gov/howrightnow/gratitude/index.html>) helps to increase self-esteem, mental strength and positive social behaviors—such as helping, sharing, and volunteering. All of these are vital to strengthening our resiliency (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/default.aspx>), a trait that we all need right now.

4. **Find ways to help others in need.** It's important to encourage children and teens to take active steps (</English/family-life/Community/Pages/Creating-Opportunities-for-Children-Teens-to-Contribute.aspx>) in providing service to their communities. Help them find causes that they are interested in, such as volunteering for a nursing home or raising money for charity. By participating in such giving activities, they will gain a sense of purpose and develop skills that will help them succeed in life.
5. **Be a role model.** One way to teach your children to be more grateful is by actually being more grateful yourself. Show them your appreciation on a regular basis and they will learn to follow in your footsteps. You can start by modeling good behavior and practicing positive discipline techniques (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Disciplining-Your-Child.aspx>).

Remember

Spending just a few minutes a day to practice gratitude with our families can have a positive impact on how we address stressful situations life unexpectedly throws our way. It is especially effective as part of an overall family wellness plan that focuses on healthy eating, sleeping, screen time (</English/health-issues/conditions/eyes/Pages/What-Too-Much-Screen-Time-Does-to-Your-Childs-Eyes.aspx>) habits, and daily physical activity. Regular check-ups (</English/family-life/health-management/Pages/Well-Child-Care-A-Check-Up-for-Success.aspx>) with your pediatrician are also a wonderful opportunity to further discuss gratitude and other ways to improve your family's physical and emotional (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/default.aspx>) resilience.

Be sure to talk with your pediatrician (</English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/Is-it-OK-to-call-the-pediatrician-during-COVID-19-even-if-Im-not-sure-my-child-is-sick.aspx>) if you have any concerns about your child's health and wellbeing.

More information

- How to Help Children Build Resilience During Uncertain Times (</English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Building-Resilience-in-Uncertain-Times.aspx>)
- Kindness: How a Small Act Can Make a Big Difference (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Kindness-Can-Make-a-Big-Difference.aspx>)
- Gratitude Works (<https://www.cdc.gov/howrightnow/gratitude/index.html>) (CDC)

About Dr. Munshi



Datta Munshi MD, FAAP, is a practicing community pediatrician and mom of three in Atlanta. She has a strong interest in collaborating with schools and local community resources to promote physical and emotional wellness for all children. She serves on various committees including the Georgia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics Chapter's Committee on School Health, the Forsyth County Total Wellness Collaborative, and Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Behavioral Health Initiative to promote improved communication between organizations serving children.

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