

Michelle Barry PhD

Family Life-Coach

810-344-4490

Growing Gratitude

As we go through our busy days we often take for granted the beauty around us, the blessings in our lives, and the special people around us. We forget to “stop and smell the roses” and hurry to complete all the tasks on our to do list. If we don’t finish our task list today it carries into tomorrow and brings a bit of stress or possibly significant anxiety. I want to take a moment to reflect on the importance of gratitude in our daily lives, the importance it has for our emotional and physical health, and how we as parents can help develop gratitude in our children.

Researchers have studied gratitude and it’s relationship to positive connections with others, mental health, and life satisfaction. Gratitude can enhance optimism, pro-social behavior, positive emotions, generosity, cooperation, engagement, and school connectedness. Yale University has also reported links to lowering blood pressure, increasing immune function, as well as decreasing depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. To many of us it may seem that gratitude should be second nature but gratefulness does not come naturally and as parents we have to work toward teaching and nurturing gratitude in our children.

Developmental Differences

It’s important as parents to recognize that the developmental stage your children are going through plays a role in the presence or absence of certain skills. Some researchers have looked at the age range for the development of gratitude and found kids initially experience and express true gratitude somewhere between 6 and 8 years old. Now, that doesn’t mean we wait until they’re that age to begin teaching gratitude but this helps us become aware that it is more difficult for little ones to truly “get” gratitude. Also becoming grateful is a process and doesn’t happen all at once. Language development plays a role in gratitude as well as egocentrism. Egocentrism is a natural and normal phase kids go through, approximately between ages 2-7 and then again in the adolescent years. It is a time when kids have a hard time taking another person’s point of view and are self-focused. I’ve heard some parents say “he/she is so ungrateful” but I encourage parents to be patient and keep working at it. Showing a lack of gratitude is not necessarily intentional.

Before age 6 kids say “thank you” less often. By age 10 and beyond “thank you” increases. However, is gratitude MORE than just saying “thank you?” Why yes it is....

In the early years kids learn to say “thank you” through modeling, guidance and repetition from parents. In the school age years children begin showing their gratitude by giving something to another person. During the tween years they are likely show gratitude by helping others in need. As they move into the teen years gratitude will be shown through their actions such as being responsible and working hard. Truly being grateful can include the statement of “thank you” but it goes deeper into a self-identified feeling of gratitude, the acknowledgement and “warm appreciation of the kindness of others” that has such positive impact on our lives.

How to Teach Gratitude

In infancy it is suspected that gratitude development begins when parents initially give love and nourishment for developing attachment. Parents then teach children to say “please” and “thank you” but it’s important to go beyond. Listed here are some strategies that go beyond these early, albeit important phases.

1. Add **meaning** to the “thank you” with little ones. We teach kids to say “thank you” but we want kids to understand why we’re saying it, not to just say it superficially. If you ask a child “Why do we say thank you?” many will say... “Because it’s nice.” We want kids to have a deeper meaning (over time) for their thank you.

Example

During a story: “See that boy”
 “That boy is eating dinner”
 “‘The little boy says thank you”

Then comes the “why”:

“He is thankful that his parents gave him yummy food to help make his empty belly feel better.” This gives meaning to the “thank you” rather than just a simple, yet polite “thank you.”

2. Counting Ones Blessings: In this activity each individual can verbally share or write down the blessings in their life. This can be done at the dinner table or written before bedtime. “I’m blessed to have such a fun dog.”

3. Gratitude Journal: A gratitude journal can be kept by each member of the family and written in each day. Every night before bed each person writes 3 things they are grateful for from their day. It gives you and your children the opportunity to think about and really value the gifts in your life. This can be as simple as “I’m grateful for the wonderful meal we had at dinner.” Being grateful for simple events can be just as important as big events.

4. Writing and giving a thank you note

5. Doing a charitable project and giving to others. Involving your kids in collecting their toys or raising money that they will donate.

6. Helping a family member or friend, helping around the house, and bringing attention to the feelings/different perspectives of all the people involved.

7. Making gifts to give to others that are meaningful and heartfelt.

Parent Corner

I asked parents to tell me their favorite way to teach gratitude and they sent in some awesome responses. I am truly grateful for the personal information they have shared with me so that I can share it with you.

Rhonda: I take my kids to a homeless shelter for women and children then when we leave we talk the experience.

Dawn: I teach them to be humble and appreciate the smallest things in life. Help when you are able, and always stay humble. Also believe that everything, good or bad, happens for a reason. Even if we don't understand it at the time, God's in control.

MJ: Sometimes at a family dinner we have (and still do) ask everyone to just give one thing they are thankful for from their day. Usually accompanied by groans and laughs we all comply, but I still think it has been good.

Nancy: Every morning I have my son say three positive things about himself! I love it... trying to build his self-esteem and to teach him to help build others as well.

Jenn: Every year, I make my kids go through their toys and clothes (usually right before Christmas) and decide what we are going to give to little boys and girls that don't have toys and clothes. I've also had them take stuffed animals to U of M Motts Children's hospital to give to their donation center for the sick kids.

Resources

If you would like to read more about gratitude and topics in this research area here is a go-to list that I have used for my resources:

Robert A. Emmons and Robin Stern
Jeffrey Froh, David Miller & Stephanie Snyder
Michael E. McCullough
Sonja Lyubomirsky
Kennon M. Sheldon
Martin Seligman