



Children and Families: Health and Wellness

Gratitude: A Lifestyle Worth Developing

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According to Webster (1999), gratitude is the state of being grateful, thankful, a readiness to show appreciation, and a disposition to return kindness. Practicing an attitude of gratitude is a habit vital, not only to an individual, but as well to families and society as a whole. As we observe our current state in society, some believe it appears attitudes of entitlement, resentment, and victimhood are evident. The purpose for this current discussion is to explore the reasons and the benefits for being grateful and furthermore, to consider ways to cultivate a habit of gratefulness in families and thus, influence our children.

Adams (2019) suggests we be grateful for our life and for the fact of life itself. He asserts that if we allow ourselves, we can find many reasons to be grateful (awareness to enjoy the senses (seeing, hearing, and smelling); ability to speak; capacity to feel; aptitude to learn; capacity to extend mercy; and the potential to forgive). When we look at the broader picture, we acknowledge that our lives are contingent on others; their ability to give life and love, for our language, our culture, our roots, our heritage. Adams (2019) believes gratitude reflects and recognizes reality; this reality refers to the truth about our human condition that escapes the self-centered child or narcissistic adolescent. Adults learn this sense of reality with maturity and experience. Frequently, individuals depend on what they receive, but not necessarily what they earned, controlled, or were entitled because of their particular merits.

Generating from extensive studies, Adams (2019) describes gratitude as revealing itself with a positive mood, increased resiliency, better physical health, less fatigue, and more restorative sleep. Gratitude lends to patience, humbleness, self-control, joy, better relationships, kindness,

service, and even wisdom. Having an attitude of gratitude is just an overall healthy, joyful, and good decision.

Hussong (2017) discusses how psychologists studying gratitude clearly describe gratitude means more than saying thank you. Instead gratitude requires children to use a set of socio-emotional skills. The researchers at the University of North Carolina's *Raising Grateful Children Project* purport that gratitude in children incorporates perspective taking, emotional knowledge, and skills that children start to develop approximately from three-to-five years of age (Hussong, 2017).

Hussong (2017) describes four parts to the experience of gratitude:

- 1) What we NOTICE in our lives for which we already recognize to be grateful.
- 2) How do we THINK about why we have been given these things? (Why did I receive this?)
- 3) How we FEEL about the things we have been given? (Does it make us happy?)
- 4) What we DO to express our appreciation in return. (Is there a way you want to show how you feel about receiving this?)

Children become able to show more gratitude as they develop and become mature. This happens as children gain cognitive skills, practice using these skills, and begin to connect the NOTICE, THINK, and FEEL aspects of experiencing gratitude coupled with the DO part of expressing gratitude (Hussong, 2017). This awareness of process is tantamount to our understanding as we nurture young ones to make gratitude part of the family milieu.

Conversely, Adams (2019) believes entitlement involves exaggerated feelings of superiority and deserving more than others. Entitlement is a psychological trait that leads to unmet expectations. Entitlement is the opposite of humility and gratitude and instead, seeks to foster self instead of others. Adams (2019) suggests that gratitude is based in the reality of the human person and virtues of humility, wisdom, and kindness; whereas, entitlement is delusional and destructive. Entitlement fosters negative traits and vices such as anger, resentment, self-righteousness, superiority, emotional fragility, and of course, ingratitude. In other words, gratitude seeks to give more where entitlement seeks to receive more; gratitude builds and entitlement destroys.

Reiser (2014) poses 11 suggestions for instilling true gratitude in our children. These easy-to-follow recommendations become a supportive way for families to incorporate daily practices of gratitude.

Reiser (2014) suggests gratitude goes beyond manners and instead, becomes a mindset and lifestyle. The 11 practices include:

- 1) Name your blessings every day.
- 2) Be a grateful parent (tell our children why we are grateful for them). Gratitude goes beyond material things.

- 3) Resist the urge to shower children with too much. It is important children learn to value and respect their possessions.
- 4) Have children participate/collaborate when they want something. (Children can use allowances or earnings to save for a wanted item.)
- 5) Write thank you notes. Some suggest writing a handwritten note is a dying art. It is important children participate in this practice. (This author requires her community/public health nursing students to sign thank you notes for all the outside speakers that come to share with the class).
- 6) Set a good example by saying, "Thank you." No one will ever fault you for frequently saying thank you with sincerity; express appreciation. By practicing these values, our children will embrace what we practice and not merely what we speak. Ask yourself, "What does your walk look like?"
- 7) Blessing by serving; spirituality and gratitude go hand-in-hand. Reiser suggests Linking gratitude with a spiritual authority.
- 8) Encourage children to give back; better to give than to receive. For example, starting the habits of passing along children's used toys, helping the elderly, or sharing cookies with a neighbor become powerful life lessons.
- 9) Insist on politeness and respect. Treat others with dignity and respect. It is important to treat children this way as well. (Be wary of anyone who does not). Be accountable for what you say and how it makes someone feel. Be a role model.
- 10) Look for teachable moments and seize those moments. Connect the concept of gratitude with real life settings.
- 11) Find the silver lining. Make lemonade from a lemon...have an attitude of gratitude and let your face show it. It is critically important that children see adults modeling these behaviors.

Situations become more about the perspective than the actual circumstance.

It is more productive to teach children to be resilient and to refocus on the positives; sometimes, it becomes easier to overlook the positive when caught up in a difficult circumstance.

In other words, let us look at the positives and interact with our children to create a proactive and grateful family.

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