

Thank you.

By Jennifer Sullivan

It's more than an expression to express gratitude. It's an attitude of appreciation that parents should foster in their children – at Thanksgiving and every other day of the year.

Although the colonists and their Indian neighbors never indulged in turkey, pumpkin pie or Lions' football, they did celebrate their very first Thanksgiving by feasting on a bountiful harvest and giving thanks.

This month, many of us will uphold that tradition when we sit down to dinner and reflect upon the true meaning of the holiday. But is it enough to show gratitude only during Thanksgiving? Should counting our blessings be designated to a single day on the calendar?

In today's fast-paced society, we all have a tendency to get wrapped up in our day-to-day routines and take the good things in our lives, such as our homes, our health and even our loved ones, for granted. But by doing so, experts warn, we are only doing our children a disservice.

For the past 10 years, Dr. Robert Emmons, psychology professor at the University of California at Davis, has been studying the concept of gratitude. His research shows that cultivating an attitude of gratitude can actually increase a person's level of happiness, and in his recent book *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 2007), he unveils scientific evidence linking

gratitude to psychological, physical and interpersonal benefits.

"I think the biggest benefit is that gratitude strengthens relationships with others and creates a sense of obligation to society," Emmons says.

If we don't cultivate gratitude in our children, however, Emmons warns that we risk raising kids who grow up to be unhappy and isolated.

"We see a lot of ungrateful kids who become teenagers and young adults who have a sense of entitlement ... because we live in such a blessed, affluent society," adds Troy-based psychotherapist and mother Connie Wood.

In an age of abundance and instant gratification, teaching our children to be grateful is no easy task, says Paulina Multhaupt, a professor of psychology at Macomb Community College. Nevertheless, she says, it is our responsibility.

"Gratitude is not innate — if it was innate we'd all have it — so it's definitely a learned behavior. And if we don't have anyone there teaching us, then we're going to miss it."

Beyond manners

Although younger children cannot yet grasp the concept of gratitude, experts agree it's never too early to start nurturing it.

"As parents, we need to teach our children, first and foremost, to say thank you," Multhaupt says.

Charlotte Johnson, an Oakland Township mother of four, stressed that lesson early on.

Johnson had her kids carefully open gifts one at a time, reflect on them and thank the person who gave them the gift.

"Rather than tearing through gifts, I slowed the process down," Johnson says. "I would focus on the idea that the gift is more about someone thinking about you and wanting to please you, and that's what's important, not necessarily the gift."

Dr. Christopher Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, says that these early lessons, or "surface habits," set the stage for gratitude, but it's up to parents to develop it as the child matures.

"You teach the etiquette, the politeness, but probably the most important thing in

child rearing is, you gotta walk the walk," Peterson says. "If I want my kids to be grateful, I have to be grateful in their presence."

He stresses that while it's important to talk to your children about gratitude, you really have to model the behavior. If your child gives you a Mother's or Father's Day present, for example, write him or her a thank you note, or have your children reflect on what they're thankful for at bedtime. Just be sure you share your gratitude with them as well.

Experts say expressing gratitude should not be strictly reserved for material objects, but should also be employed for opportunities, accomplishments or acts of kindness, such as a hug.

"There are little things that we can do in our everyday lives that don't have to do with giving gifts, that we can point out and model gratitude," Multhaupt says.

Although we all juggle careers, soccer games, band concerts and a trillion other things while raising a family, experts warn we all need to slow down and recognize the good things in life.

"As parents, we sometimes, at the end of the day, have said many more negative things to our children than positive," Wood says. "We've said 'don't do that, don't do this, time to stop doing that, time to do your homework.' It's all in the job of parenting, which is important, but we seldom then come back and say thank you. 'Thank you for not fighting with me today when I asked you to get off the computer and do your homework.'"

She adds that while parents need to extend gratitude to their children, they also need to demonstrate it by thanking each other. If your husband voluntarily washes the dishes, says Wood, thank him — in front of the kids.

The risks

Just as parents can enhance the virtue of gratitude by teaching and modeling, we also have the dangerous ability to cultivate ingratitude.

"We tend to indulge our kids with things because we can, because we love them and it feels good ... but too much of that type of expression of love can lead to a sense of entitlement, rather than gratitude," says Wood, who warns that by spoiling our children, we risk inadvertently teaching them to be ungrateful.

Giving

A path to gratitude

"A lot of people in America have money, but some people in other countries don't – and we should help them."

No, this isn't a campaign promise from any of the presidential candidates. It's the reason a little girl from Lathrup Village gives part of her allowance to a little girl in Nicaragua.

At just 8 years old, Danielle Sommerville knows about hunger and poverty. As a consequence, however, she also understands the concept of gratitude.

"You don't want to upset your child, but sometimes it's good to explain to them that everyone doesn't have the same opportunities they do," says LaJuandrea Sommerville, Danielle's mom.

Sommerville, 47, and her husband have been fostering a sense of gratitude in their daughter since she was in diapers.

When Danielle's toy box began to overflow, mom says, they would pick out several items to donate to charity. When Danielle was about 3, she began to ask where her toys were going. The couple explained to the toddler the sad reality – not every child has toys.

Empathy is the precursor to gratitude, says Paulina Mulhaupt, a professor of psychology at Macomb Community College, and by teaching our children to place themselves in other's shoes, we can nurture gratitude, she says.

She and her oldest son routinely rifle through the cupboards and donate canned food to charity. Mulhaupt explains to the 4-year-old that some people don't have enough to eat, and it's nice to share with others. Although young children may not completely understand, she says, if giving back is done on a regular basis, it naturally becomes a part of that child.

"Teach them to appreciate what they have. Kids don't realize other kids don't have things," Mulhaupt says. "You don't want them to feel guilty, but remind them they should be happy they have food."

Dr. Jeffrey Froh, assistant professor of psychology at Hofstra University in New York, adds that by donating to charity or volunteering, kids will develop an increased awareness of how fortunate they are, as well as be on the receiving end of genuine gratitude.

Sommerville believes by making Danielle aware of what others sometimes go without, her daughter is learning to count her own blessings.

"I'm thankful for my house, my bed, my toys and my parents," Danielle says.

And rather than shelter her daughter from the harsh realities of the world, Sommerville believes the truth only empowers her.

"Now she knows you can change things – you can make a difference."

Dr. Jeffrey Froh, assistant professor of psychology at Hofstra University in New York and a leading global expert on gratitude in youth, points out that in today's society, children are bombarded with the message that "more is better, and what you have is not good enough."

But that kind of attitude, he warns, can lead to greed and bitterness toward others. In fact, Froh and his colleagues

recently completed a study that found a strong link between materialistic values and envy. And envy, Froh says, is a major obstacle to gratitude.

"Are you the one who's putting in all these extra hours for the bigger, faster car or the bigger house?" Froh says, "Or are you just extremely grateful for the small ranch that you have, and you're able to focus on more intrinsic pursuits, such ▶

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as building relationships with your kids, friends, neighbors and family?"

While ambition is also an important quality to instill in our children, experts say parents have to carefully balance that with teaching them to be thankful for what they have.

Emmons points out that as a society, although our material wealth and conveniences have increased over the past century, our happiness has not.

"One way to interpret this is that expectations and feelings of deservingness have also increased," Emmons says. "Therefore, we are less likely to want what we have."

One of the keys to achieving happiness, Emmons and other experts argue, is in fact, gratitude.

"Grateful kids tend to be happier, they tend to be more satisfied with their lives, more satisfied with their relationships, more optimistic and more willing to help others," Froh says.

The benefits

When Danielle Sommerville complained about not receiving a certain toy for Christmas several years ago, her parents used the 8-year-old's disappointment as an opportunity to teach her patience, as well as something that's often missing in the age of credit cards – delayed gratification.

Danielle eventually got the much-desired toy – a pretend barbecue grill – but her parents made her wait.

Danielle's mother, Lajuandrea, says her daughter *shouldn't* receive everything she asks for, and for those items she considers too extravagant, mom says, Danielle has to earn them.

"She's more grateful, and she even takes better care of the things she buys," the Lathrup Village mom has noticed.

Delayed gratification is an important foundation of gratitude, says Wood, allowing kids to learn to appreciate things more. In addition, they'll be better off in

the long run, such as when those credit card offers come knocking.

Although she knows her children are grateful, Johnson realizes that teaching gratitude is an ongoing process. And now that her daughter Kaileigh is a teenager, Johnson has found that she has to set boundaries and reinforce the value of gratitude now more than ever.

"I think it's very challenging where we live, and the affluence that surrounds our area. She would like to have all the latest fashions from all the latest stores and a car next year when she's 16," Johnson says. "I don't think you can help your child from wanting those things, but what you hope gets them through that time, where they find it most challenging, is the recognition that they are fortunate and so much of the world is less fortunate."

And while kids and teens may not appreciate your efforts at the time, Wood says, by setting limits and boundaries,

you lay the groundwork for them to eventually come back and say "Thank you for loving me enough to say 'no.'"

As hard as it may be to set those limits and boundaries – whether it's enforcing a curfew or having them help pay for a new video game system – by doing so, children will grow to reap the many benefits of gratitude.

"Grateful people are more empathetic, compassionate, helpful," Emmons says. "And because they are motivated to return the goodness they have been given, they make life better for people around them." ■

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