

# Here's some currency to count upon

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## **FAMILY MATTERS**

I'm in the grocery store with my kids and I've agreed to buy them a couple of small things -- some fuzzy socks for my younger son and a small toy car for the older one. Now my youngest is whining that he wants another toy.

"I just bought you those socks, and, if you don't stop asking me for the toy car, I'm going to put them back," I snarl. "You should be thanking me, not asking for something else."

The moral of this story is

- A. Never go grocery shopping with your kids,
- B. Never buy them toys at the grocery store, and
- C. Teaching kids gratitude by growling at them like a vicious dog is probably not the best approach.

But learning gratitude in a calmer, more loving manner is vital for both children and adults. While it might seem odd to advise counting your blessings in these bleak economic times, learning to be grateful is a state of mind that helps kids and adults feel happier and more content with their lives, researchers say.

"There is evidence that grateful people are more resilient to stress in general, whether we are talking minor, everyday hassles or major personal upheavals," explains Robert Emmons, a psychologist at the University of California at Davis and author of "Thanks: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier" (Houghton Mifflin, 2007, \$25). "A grateful stance in life is relatively immune to both fortune and misfortune."

While no one expects people to be grateful for losing a job or a home, gratefulness is more a state of mind, "a grateful outlook on life," that Emmons calls "defiant gratitude," and others have called "radical gratitude." One woman was still grateful after losing six buildings in Hurricane Rita, he said, and it was her gratitude that "enabled her to survive."

The most surprising benefit from gratitude is health, Emmons explains in an e-mail. Grateful adults exercise more, they get better sleep and they even report having more energy and less pain.

Children get the same kinds of benefits from feeling grateful as adults do.

Grateful kids are more satisfied with their family, their friends, their school and themselves, says Jeffrey J. Froh, an associate professor of psychology at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., and director of the Gratitude and Youth Lab. They are less depressed and they are less materialistic.

The best way to teach gratitude is to model thankful behavior by showing you are thankful for the good things in your life and grateful to friends and family for the things they do for you, researchers say.

### **Teaching moments**

Parents can help teach kids gratitude by helping them to see the effort that their grandmother took to choose a gift or pointing out how long their aunt and uncle traveled to come see their school play. They can also point out how hurtful it can be if they don't show how much they appreciate that gift or visit.

Young children can learn to say "thank you" as soon as they can talk. But children can't really learn to be grateful until they are 7 to 10 years old, Froh says. By the time children are 9 or 10, they are more empathetic and can see the kind intentions behind that gift or visit.

Young adults are even better at appreciating how much thought went into a gift or kind gesture. One study of 221 sixth- and seventh-graders asked one group of kids to count their blessings every day for two weeks by coming up with five things they were grateful for. Another group was asked to write about things that annoyed them and a third simply answered a questionnaire on happiness. After two weeks, the kids who counted their blessings were more satisfied with life, were more optimistic and were more positive about school. When researchers followed up three weeks later, the kids who counted their blessings were still more positive about school.

Families can also find ways to make gratitude part of their family ritual. Children are very concrete, so creating a collage or a gratitude tree illustrating what they're grateful for can be meaningful.

Emmons suggests putting notes in kids' lunches or sending them a text message asking if they've thanked a friend or teacher. Some families have a gratitude jar where they put money when they feel grateful, then they give the money to charity. Other families keep a gratitude journal that they begin each year at Thanksgiving.

One friend, who says daily thanks at dinner each night, encourages her family to give extra thanks when they seem out of sorts. "Every once in a while when my kids are way off, we go around the table and say what we're grateful for," she says.

### **Beware overindulgence**

As we move into the Christmas season, parents should keep in mind that the enemy of gratitude is overindulgence. Kids who get too many gifts aren't grateful. They just get a kind of gift fatigue. One reason grateful kids are less materialistic is that they learn to appreciate what they have, Froh says.

One study of teenagers found that the most materialistic kids want things for social status and to look good to their peers. Not surprisingly, the kids who put a high value on having lots of things and being popular are also the kids who are least likely to be grateful, Froh says.

Kids can also learn to be grateful for what they have by talking about and seeing that others don't have as much. My kids recently went to stock the shelves of a food pantry with our church. I hope it taught them that other families may be going hungry, while our family never worries about having enough to eat.

In these days when most of us have less money to count, counting blessings makes more sense than ever. Even if we can't shield them completely from the current crisis, we can at least give our children the armor of gratitude.

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