

'Grateful kids are happier kids'

Instilling a sense of gratitude is a crucial part of parenting, researcher finds

BY KATHERINE DEDYNA, TIMES COLONIST OCTOBER 10, 2009



Amy Harris with Thanksgiving Dinner from the Canadian Living menu.

Photograph by: Bruce Deachman, Times Colonist

On Thanksgiving weekend, most families take the time to formally acknowledge the abundance in their lives -- the love, security and material comforts. But why stop at Thanksgiving?

Helping kids keep that attitude of gratitude year-round gives them a better shot at what parents want

most for them -- happiness, says researcher Jeffrey Froh. Instilling a sense of appreciation is one of the greatest gifts that parents can give their children, he says. "The benefits are huge. Grateful kids are happier kids."

The sense of gratitude seems to emerge between ages seven and 10, and parents should do everything they can to foster it, says Froh, an assistant psychology professor at Hofstra College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in New York. His research, published in the *Journal of Personality* in 2008, found that young adolescents who were asked to list five things they were thankful for each day for two weeks were "more satisfied with their lives, more optimistic, more grateful and more satisfied with their school experience" compared to kids asked to focus on hassles, or the control group.

The kids listed everything from "mom didn't go crazy when I accidentally broke a patio table," to the coach who helped them with baseball practice to their family's good health.

Three weeks later, those students were still showing gratitude toward people who had helped them.

Another of Froh's studies suggests that kids in Grade 3 experienced more positive emotions two months after writing a letter to someone they had never properly thanked and delivering it by hand.

Rather than lecturing kids with "you should be grateful," Froh suggests parents walk their kids through the experience of someone who has helped them, emphasizing how nice that was and how the child benefited from that. The three factors to consider are: Altruistic intention of the other person; the cost to them in time and energy; and the naming of the benefit to the child.

It's important for kids to recognize all the people along the way who have helped them, Froh says. "That's one of the ways that grateful people think."

Right now, Froh is looking at the relationship between materialism -- the valuing of things, appearances and status -- and gratitude in kids.

The finding: "Apart from grateful kids being less materialistic, they're also less envious of others, they're less depressed, they're happier, they're more satisfied with their family and friends."

Rather than showering kids with endless treats, he recommends slowing down and helping kids realize how much they've already got compared to so many other children.

Robert Emmons, a University of California psychologist and author of *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, credits Froh as "the worldwide expert on gratitude in kids" and concurs with the importance of early attention to the emotion. "Childhood may be the optimal time to promote healthy attitudes and the prevention of problems, and gratitude training could play an important role in any program designed to foster well-being," Emmons writes.

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SIX WAYS TO RAISE A GRATEFUL CHILD

Psychologist Michele Borba, author of *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions*, suggests that kids counting their blessings should be incorporated into family life and offers some ways to introduce the concept.

- Combine dinner-time talk with kids saying their Thank You ABCs -- for instance A for an Aunt, B for a brother, C for the cat, etc. Make it fun and don't worry about getting through the whole alphabet.
- Give thanks before meals and at bedtime before an exchange of hugs and kisses.
- Encourage your child to write a letter to someone who has helped them -- a teacher, coach, grandparent or group leader.
- Fight the desire to overindulge your child with too many things. Getting everything they want does not help kids learn to appreciate what they have.
- Have kids write down something they feel grateful for several times a week, for at least three weeks, whether it's a dictation, diary or computer entry while their parents do the same.
- Show kids your appreciation when they do something thoughtful, to encourage more such behaviour.

Source: www.micheleborba.com

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