

## Why Counting Blessings Is So Hard for Teenagers



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As Thanksgiving preparations shifted into high gear, media outlets large and small have been opining on the importance of gratitude, but, more specifically, they've often targeted their sights on the most ungrateful creature of all: the adolescent.

Pointing to the research of Hofstra professor Jeffrey Froh, a number of these reports have suggested that it is remarkably easy to rid your teen of his selfishness and entitlement. All you've got to do is have your teen start making daily lists of things they're thankful for. After a couple weeks, legend has it, your teen will no longer be the monster you've come to know. The child will be happier, optimistic, generous, and even physically healthier. Best of all, these benefits will endure, even three and five months later.

That makes for great holiday dinner conversation, but, unfortunately, it's a wishful distortion of Froh's data. Not only does it misstate his work—it negates the most important implications of his findings.

Froh isn't just a professor; he's also a clinician, working as a school psychologist in an affluent Long Island, New York, community. Froh has done numerous studies on how writing gratitude journals and gratitude letters affects the mental state of middle-schoolers and high-schoolers. He had been inspired by similar work on college students by the University of California's Robert Emmons.

But Emmons's and Froh's findings do not duplicate each other. The different ages of their subject populations have lead to contrasting results. In Emmons's experiments, gratitude journaling was beneficial to the college students. But in Froh's experiments, it hasn't been so simple or straightforward.

For example, in Froh's experiments, keeping diaries of things to be thankful for often did not lead to a more grateful mental state. In fact, control groups of kids—who did nothing, or who merely wrote down things they did that day—sometimes came out feeling the most grateful. It's true that in one experiment, kids who did the gratitude exercise felt better three and five months later. But they didn't feel better while the experiment was going on, or immediately after.

It's very possible that when junior-high students are required to do the gratitude journals, they might feel forced or manipulated. They might feel like their teachers are controlling them, and thus react to the journaling in ways that college students don't.

Froh has also found that middle-schoolers suffer "gratitude fatigue" very easily. Day after day, many write the same list: "My dog, my cat, my catcher's mitt; my dog, my cat, my catcher's mitt...."

Parents and teachers need to recognize that being grateful, and being a teenager, are often diametrically opposed. To be a teenager—in the classic sense—means expressing a fundamental desire to individuate from one's family. This is not unhealthy behavior; it's completely normal. They are soon to be independent adults, and they need to take themselves for test-drives. Pushing parents away, and wanting things to be none of your business, and exhibiting total ignorance of all you've done for them, are all behaviors that conjure independence. Asking them to be grateful—and wishing they'd be more aware of how their success is due to you—is difficult for them to feel at the same time as they're trying to get out from under your thumb. Thus grateful teenagers are rare, not the norm.

The most important finding in Froh's research is that gratitude exercises help some teenagers more than others. Froh found that gratitude exercises don't really do anything—and might even backfire—on students with high positive affect: kids who are usually already fairly optimistic about their lives, and motivated, and inspired.

Those who really should be asked to do gratitude exercises are kids low in these qualities—kids who rarely feel excitement, hope, or sunny happiness. In Froh's experiments, these kids really benefit from ritualized gratitude.

In fact, the science hints that if we support children's quest for autonomy, they're more likely to be grateful,

forgiving, and respectful as a result. Froh doesn't think that his research means we should stop counting our blessings at the Thanksgiving table, or that we should give up on reminding kids to say thank you. But his work is a reminder there are limits to what we can do to change children's emotional development.

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