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The grateful child

Are children who learn how to count their blessings healthier and happier?

By Leslie Crawford

Forget love, war, and death. On the subject of ungrateful children, William Shakespeare really nailed it when he wrote, "Ingratitude! Thou marble-hearted fiend, more hideous when thou show'st thee in a child than the sea-monster!" Or as any parent might grouse on a particularly trying day: "I do everything for my child, and she's *still* ungrateful!"

For those of us who worry that today's children appear grateful for nothing and entitled to everything — despite all that we do for them — grownups would do well to take note and take heart. Researchers in the relatively new field of gratitude studies are finding that thankfulness can indeed be nurtured and taught. Further, there appears to be plenty of compelling reasons to help a child along in the count-your-blessings department.

Nine tips for a more grateful child

- 1. Be a gratitude role model:** When possible, demonstrate thankful behavior.
- 2. Make space for thanks:** Allow time to remember the good in life.
- 3. Talk the talk:** Express gratitude with words like *fortunate* and *gift*.
- 4. Write it down:** Encourage your child to count her blessings by keeping a gratitude journal.
- 5. Pay a thank-you visit:** Have your child write a card to someone who did him a favor, then read it to the person in person.
- 6. Use visual reminders:** Text your child thank-you notes or leave them in her lunch box. Remind her to surprise others with such notes.
- 7. Practice mindfulness:** With your child, focus on one sense —

Thanksgiving science

Gratitude researchers have found that being grateful isn't just a nice personal quality that leads to good manners. It delivers a profound payoff. By being truly thankful for all that life provides, a child has more chance of being emotionally, physically, and socially successful. One still-unpublished study, conducted by Dr. Jeffrey Froh of New York's Hofstra University and Dr. Robert Emmons of the University of California at Davis, has found that when older children (ages 14 to 19) are able to acknowledge their good fortune, they're more likely to be happy and experience lower levels of depression, envy, and materialism. There also appears to be a connection between feeling grateful and having higher GPAs — though whether it's increased levels of gratitude that produce higher GPAs or the other way around remains unclear.

"Gratitude opens you up to the abundance that is out there and lets you recognize the goodness in your life," says Froh, a psychology professor who has conducted eight gratitude studies over the past three years. According to Froh, a grateful child feels more connected and loved. After all, if he's able to understand that many others care enough to make an effort for him, his life is improved.

the sight of autumn leaves, for example – and savor the experience together.

8. Highlight the benefits:

Explain how gratitude strengthens your child's relationships: "That was sweet of you to thank your friend for the homework help. I'm sure it made your friendship stronger."

9. Give credit where it's due:

When your child reaches a goal – whether it's winning a spelling bee or joining varsity soccer – point out who helped him succeed.

Adapted from recommendations from Dr. Jeffrey Froh. For a list of his studies, go [here](#).

For the past decade, experts like Emmons and Froh have been conducting "gratitude interventions," in which kids – preschoolers through college students – are encouraged to recognize the good in their lives through a series of exercises, from writing a thank-you note and reciting it to the benefactor to keeping a gratitude journal.

Overall, the results have been encouraging: Just as with adults, it seems that children, when encouraged to be more conscious of life's bounties, become more grateful.

Who's got gratitude?

Yet there remains much to be learned about children and gratitude. There's some evidence suggesting that girls are more grateful than boys (although boys may derive more benefit from expressing gratitude). Also, Froh says that while there's not yet any hard data, there's speculation that a child's ability to be grateful depends on his or her age. One study by researchers Nansook Park and Christopher Peterson

looked at gratitude and life satisfaction in kids ages 3 to 9 and found that only 7- to 9-year-olds resembled adults in their capacity to feel true gratitude. The reason? Most 3- to 6-year-olds don't have the emotional development to see outside themselves enough to be genuinely grateful.

Once children enter preadolescence – around 10 or 11 – most make a grateful leap. Although, it's worth noting, that since children go through so much developmentally, there may be dramatic fluctuations. One day a 12-year-old might rush to hug his mom for getting an unexpected new backpack; another, her kindness might be met with shrugged-off indifference. But by ages 10 or 11, says Froh, "as children become less egocentric and enter early adolescence, their ability to empathize strengthens." Empathy, he notes, "may be the strongest developmental catalyst of gratitude."

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Interestingly, Froh found that children who are already more emotionally positive do not benefit as much from gratitude interventions. "Compared with those low in positive emotions, they may have hit an emotional 'ceiling,'" says Froh. "In other words, if on a scale of 1 to 10 a child is already an 8 when measured by qualifiers like happiness and optimism, he may not be much helped by being taught to be more grateful." But a gratitude intervention for a child who is only a 5 "may give him the boost he needs to experience well-being."

Teaching the attitude of gratitude

So how to take these newfound scientific findings and apply them? While gratitude journals and thank-you visits can be valuable exercises for a child, simple day-to-day methods may reap the greatest long-term results.

Start by walking children through the thoughts of gratitude. As in, "Wow, because your friend Jeremy skipped his soccer game and helped you with your homework, you did great on your math test." Froh also

encourages parents not to dictate how children express their thanks, but to let them show gratitude in whatever way is most comfortable – from a picture to a favor in return.

Finally and most notably, as Froh points out, children learn best when grownups model the very behavior they'd like to see in their kids.

“It’s monkey see, monkey do,” says Froh. Whether it’s presenting a bouquet of flowers to a babysitter for staying extra late or delivering a thank-you note to the school janitor for his hard work, your actions speak louder than all the “how ‘bout a little gratitude” harangues.

And nothing teaches gratitude better than openly expressing your own thankfulness for what you have (instead of grumbling about what you don’t). Gradually, your child will absorb an invaluable message: That to show and give thanks is its own reward.