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## **Gratitude in Youth: A Review of Gratitude Interventions and Some Ideas for Applications**

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Offering and receiving help are fundamental to human survival. The fact that children engage in beneficial social exchanges before they can even fully appreciate them underscores the importance of cooperation and altruism for human society. Gratitude is a higher-level moral emotion that enables people to notice, understand, and capitalize on beneficial exchanges with others (Buck, 2004; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). As an evolutionary adaptation that sustains reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971), gratitude is a necessary ingredient for humans' survival. Securing supportive relationships early on can provide bedrock for many positive outcomes in human development. In this article, we review recent research on the benefits of gratitude to individuals, especially youth, and the interventions that have been empirically shown to foster gratitude in youth. We conclude by suggesting potential ways gratitude can be applied in schools to help bolster students' social and academic success.

When people feel grateful they acknowledge the significance of a prosocial act that another person has bestowed upon them (Buck, 2004; Heider, 1958; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979; Zaleski, 1988). People tend to experience gratitude in response to benefits that they perceive as valuable to them, provided intentionally, and provided at some cost to the benefactor (Okamoto & Robinson, 1997; Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968). That is, when people receive a gift or help from another, the social context provides information that they can use to form beneficial attributions about the event. The more beneficial one's attributions are, the more grateful one feels. Benefit appraisals can be driven by people's tendency to be grateful in general or by their gratitude in response to receiving specific benefits (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008).

Thus, gratitude can be trained by sensitizing people to instances of helping in their lives. But when should training begin? Gratitude is thought to mature gradually between ages 7 and 10, as children acquire the requisite mental tools to process judgments of intentionality and cost to the benefactor (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Graham, 1988). Prior evidence supports this. For example, Gleason and Weintraub (1976) found that only 21% of children 6 years or younger expressed thanks to adults who gave them candy, whereas more than 80% of children 10 years or older expressed gratitude in the same situation. Whether participants experienced gratitude or just behaved politely, though, was unclear. To clarify this, Graham (1988) had children ages 5–11 read vignettes about a new student getting picked by the captain to join the school baseball team, and she manipulated the captain's responsibility for the benefit by having the captain pick according to personal intention or a team rule. Results showed that 10- and 11-year-olds were more likely to give the captain a gift if they were chosen intentionally. Five- and 6-year-olds, however, were not; those chosen intentionally were as likely to give the captain a gift as those who were chosen via the team rule. Furthermore, how much 5- and 6-year-olds were "grateful"—measured by a single-item scale consisting of five progressively smaller circles horizontally arranged across a response sheet—did not mediate the relation between the captain's behavioral motives and whether they gave a gift, but it did for 10- and 11-year-olds. Thus, the link between attributions of responsibility for benefits received, the experience of gratitude, and the desire to repay one's benefactor may become consolidated between ages 7 and 10. It may be, then, that genuine gratitude emerges when empathy matures enough for children to understand others' intentions to enhance their life satisfaction, which occurs reliably by age 10 (Park & Peterson, 2006).

### **Why Foster Gratitude in Children?**

People are grateful when they notice and appreciate the good things that happen to them and express thanks to those responsible (Emmons, 2007). Gratitude serves to alert individuals to the valuable relationships in their life, to reinforce the kindness of their benefactors, and to motivate individuals to reciprocate kindness to their benefactors or extend it to

others (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Its experience and practice promotes supportive exchanges between people and nurtures trusting relationships, benefiting society at large (Haidt, 2003; McCullough et al., 2001). Ample evidence attests to a variety of positive outcomes in adults, including improved health behavior, mental health, and psychological as well as social well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Two recent longitudinal studies indicate why gratitude may be beneficial to youth in particular. One study linked gratitude to greater social support (perceived and actual) and protection from stress and depression over time (Wood, Maltby, Gillet, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). A second study, of an actual gift-giving event among sororities, showed that beneficiaries (new sisters) were most grateful when they felt understood, valued, and cared for by a benefactor (veteran sister) and that this predicted later increases in both parties' sense of connection to each other as well as beneficiaries' sense of connection to the sorority overall (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). These results suggest that gratitude not only helps people form, maintain, and strengthen supportive relationships, but it also helps them feel connected to a caring community which values their contributions. Such assets are critical to the resilience and healthy development of children and adolescents (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). However, aside from several isolated studies that preceded current theorizing on gratitude (e.g., Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938; Becker & Smenner, 1986; Gleason & Weintraub, 1976; Harris, Olthof, Terwogt, & Hardman, 1987; Russell & Paris, 1994), the study of gratitude in youth is in its infancy (for reviews, see Bono & Froh, 2009; Froh & Bono, 2008). Generally speaking, the emerging evidence supports many of the advantages mentioned above among younger populations. For instance, early adolescents (ages 11–13) who were more grateful reported more positive affect; optimism; social support from peer and family; and satisfaction with school, family, community, friends, and self (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009) compared to their less grateful counterparts. They also reported having fewer physical symptoms and giving more emotional support. Among late adolescents (ages 14–19), those who were more grateful reported greater life satisfaction, social integration, absorption in activities, and academic achievement and less envy, depression, and materialism (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, in press). Given the significance of such concepts as life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and strong social ties for youth's sense of connectedness to school, achievement, and adjustment (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Barber, 2005; Huebner, Suldo, & Gilman, 2006), it appears that gratitude is related to healthy psychological and social functioning in youth as it is with adults. Longitudinal evidence also indicates links to greater psychological and social functioning up to 6 months later (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010). Together, results suggest that promoting gratitude in young people would enhance their well-being psychologically, socially, and academically.

#### **Interventions to Increase Gratitude in Children and Adolescents**

Various interventions developed for adult populations indicate that gratitude may decrease depression and increase psychological well-being and social functioning (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2005). On this basis, some researchers suggested that gratitude interventions should be applied to many settings and populations so as to spread health, functionality, and happiness to more and more people and to society at large (Bono, Emmons, & McCullough, 2004). Nonetheless, gratitude interventions for youth only surfaced 2 years ago.

*Counting blessings.* The best evidence that gratitude can improve youth's wellbeing comes from three gratitude intervention studies. In one study, Froh, Sefick, and Emmons (2008) randomly assigned 11 classrooms of 6th and 7th graders (ages 11–14) to one of three conditions—gratitude, hassles, or a no treatment control—to partially replicate Emmons and McCullough's (2003) "counting blessings" intervention. Participants completed the intervention activity daily for 2 weeks and measures of psychological, physical, and social well-being at pretest, immediate posttest, and a 3-week follow-up. Those in the gratitude condition were instructed to count up to five things they were grateful for, and those in the hassles condition were asked to focus on irritants. Gratitude journal entries included benefits such as: "My coach helped me out at baseball practice," "My grandma is in good health, my family is still together, my family still loves each other, my brothers are healthy, and we have fun everyday," and "I am grateful that my mom didn't go crazy when I accidentally broke a patio table."

Counting blessings, compared with hassles, was related to more gratitude, optimism, life satisfaction, and less negative affect. Students who claimed feeling grateful for receiving help from others reported more positive affect. In fact, the relation between feeling grateful for help from others and positive affect became stronger during the 2-week intervention and was strongest 3 weeks after the intervention ended. Gratitude in response to aid also explained why students

instructed to count blessings reported more general gratitude. Recognizing the gift of aid—yet another blessing to be counted—seemed to engender more gratitude.

Most significantly, students instructed to count blessings, compared with those in the hassles or control conditions, reported more satisfaction with their school experience (i.e., find school interesting, feel good at school, think they are learning a lot, and are eager to go to school; Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000) immediately after the 2-week intervention and 3 weeks after completing it. Expressions of school satisfaction included: “I am thankful for school,” “I am thankful for my education,” and “I am thankful that my school has a track team and that I got accepted into honor society.” School satisfaction is positively related to academic and social success (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Many early and late adolescents, however, indicate significant amounts of dissatisfaction with their school experience (Huebner, Valois, Paxton, & Drane, 2005). Therefore, inducing gratitude in students via counting blessings may be a viable intervention for mitigating negative academic appraisals while promoting a positive attitude about school. Holding such a view predisposes students to improving both their academic and social competence and may help motivate them to get the most out of school.

*The gratitude visit.* In another intervention study, children and adolescents from a parochial school were randomly assigned to a gratitude intervention or a control condition (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009). Participants in the gratitude condition were asked to write a letter to a benefactor whom they have never properly thanked, to read the letter to him/her in person, and to then share their experience with others in the same condition. To illustrate, one 17-year-old female wrote and read the following letter to her mother:

I would like to take this time to thank you for all that you do on a daily basis and have been doing my whole life.... I am so thankful that I get to drive in with you [to school] everyday and ... for all the work you do for our church.... I thank you for being there whenever I need you. I thank you that when the world is against me that you stand up for me and you are my voice when I can't speak for myself. I thank you for caring about my life and wanting to be involved ... for the words of encouragement and hugs of love that get me through every storm. I thank you for sitting through countless games in the cold and rain and still having the energy to make dinner and all the things you do. I thank you for raising me in a Christian home where I have learned who God was and how to serve him.... I am so blessed to have you as my mommy and I have no idea what I would have done without you.

Participants in the control condition were asked to record and think about daily events. Findings indicated that youth low in positive affect in the gratitude condition reported greater gratitude and positive affect at posttreatment and greater positive affect at the 2-month follow-up than youth in the control condition. Thus, although 44% of the published studies found support for gratitude interventions compared against conditions inducing negative affect (e.g., recording hassles; Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009), this study suggests that there may be specific individuals—namely, those low in positive affect—who may benefit more. This study also partially replicated Seligman et al.'s (2005) “gratitude visit” study using a youth population.

*Learning schematic help appraisals.* The most promising intervention study, as we hinted earlier, seems to be one conducted by Froh, Bono, Emmons, Wood, et al. (2010) that increased gratitude by training individuals' benefit appraisals. Using the youngest children targeted by interventions to date, this study employed a novel technique of strengthening children's schematic help appraisals. Classrooms of children (8–11 years) were randomly assigned to a school-based gratitude curriculum or an attention-control curriculum. School psychology interns taught participants in the gratitude condition about the social–cognitive determinants of gratitude via structured lesson plans. (A complete set of the lesson plans for both the gratitude curriculum and attention-control curriculum can be obtained by contacting the first author—J.F.) Lessons adhered to the following outline: the introduction (session 1), understanding benefactors' intentions when being a beneficiary (session 2), understanding the cost experienced by benefactors when giving a benefit (session 3), understanding the benefits of receiving a gift bestowed by a benefactor (session 4), and the review/summary, which incorporates all components of the previous sessions (session 5). Using the methods of classroom discussions, acting out different role-plays, and writing down personal stories in a “gratitude journal,” the intern emphasized the connection between positive things happening to them and the actions of a benefactor. Across five sessions, the intern explained that whenever others are nice to us, they may be doing so on purpose (illustrating intention), using their

resources (illustrating cost), and helping us (illustrating benefit).

Students in the attention-control condition were also provided with structured lesson plans that followed an outline but focused on neutral topics, such as events of the day. Similar to the gratitude condition, the attention-control condition lessons included classroom discussions, writing assignments, and role-playing activities. Importantly, the general structure of the attention-control sessions closely mirrored those of the gratitude condition in terms of task assignment but not in terms of content.

Across two different studies, the authors found that children can be taught to become more aware of the social cognitive appraisals involved in circumstances of receiving help from another and that this schematic change makes children more grateful and benefits their well-being. A weekly intervention obtained such effects in the longterm (up to 5 months later). A daily intervention produced these effects immediately (2 days later) and showed further that children behaviorally expressed gratitude more (i.e., wrote 80% more thank you cards to their PTA) and that their teachers even observed them to be happier, compared to those in the control condition. Evidence thus supported the effectiveness of this intervention.

### **Applications for School Psychologists**

The practicality of some gratitude interventions (e.g., counting blessings) can make their use appealing. The first author (JFF) conducted a gratitude intervention with about 1,000 middle school students in their homerooms while practicing as a school psychologist. They were asked to count up to five blessings they were grateful for on a daily basis for 2 weeks. After the intervention, teachers followed a lesson plan using the focused conversation method of teaching (Nelson, 2001). They asked students the following types of questions: objective (e.g., What specific blessings did you count?), reflective (e.g., What did you like most about counting your blessings?), interpretive (e.g., What are the benefits of giving thanks?), and decisional (e.g., How can we practice gratitude in our lives and at school?).

Anecdotally speaking, students seemed to benefit from counting blessings. Some students reported recognizing that “life could be so much worse.” One student, who was from a wealthy family, stated, “I realized how good I really have it. Some kids have nothing. I just never thought about it before.” This is just one of the many creative ways we think youth can be taught to experience and express gratitude. Another option is to dedicate a specific time of year (e.g., a certain month) to expressing gratitude to others. For instance, students can write a thank you card each week for a gift received such as by another student (e.g., protecting them from a bully), an administrator (e.g., supporting a class trip to a museum), a teacher (e.g., waiting with them until their parents arrive at school to pick them up), or support staff (e.g., ensuring the heat works during the cold winter months). Given the ease of inducing gratitude, its potential for making school tasks and exercises more creative, and its benefits to individuals and their environments, gratitude interventions for youth, in our view, should be seriously considered by those interested in fostering positive youth development.

Because gratitude may strengthen supportive relationships and increase prosocial behavior in adolescents (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009), these resources may be especially useful for students with special needs, physical disabilities, or social adjustment difficulties. Teaching students to respond gratefully to friends who protect them from a bully, encourage them to persist on a task, or offer help on homework can strengthen friendships—increasing students’ satisfaction with school and their chances of succeeding. Future research should better examine the sources of youth gratitude, how gratitude is related to better goal striving, academic achievement, and social development in youth, and how to apply use of gratitude promotion toward these ends.

Simmel (1950) argued that gratitude is the moral glue of a functioning society and the “moral memory of mankind” (p. 388). This logic can be applied to school communities. School psychologists can help students identify resources provided by the board of education (e.g., funding for extracurricular activities), school-level administration (e.g., support for school plays), teachers (e.g., giving up lunch to help students), support staff (e.g., cleaning the facilities), and community volunteers (e.g., hours committed to enrichment events). Most importantly, recognizing the contributions and investments others make toward their welfare would focus students on concrete ways that they and their progress are valued at the school. Knowing that others believe in and care to bring out the best in them would motivate self-improvement. Gratitude felt and expressed by students and the improved behaviors that could ensue would likely spread to teachers and staff, encouraging them to work harder for students and helping to prevent burnout. Therefore, teaching students to count blessings and develop an attitude of gratitude may foster stronger bonds to schools and communities, helping both students and schools to thrive.

Social exchange is necessary for most organizations in society to function properly. The positive emotions of leaders

(e.g., principals, teachers) predict the performance for their entire group (George, 1995). Grateful principals may beget grateful teachers, who beget grateful students; grateful teachers and grateful students may outperform their less grateful counterparts. Indeed, evidence suggests that gratitude promotes social cohesion, relational and job satisfaction, and even organizational functioning (Emmons, 2003). Appreciation interventions indicate that many people—in organizational, educational, and healthcare settings—benefit from experiences of gratitude (Childre & Cryer, 2000). More supportive relationship networks among teachers and staff would only help meet the rising challenges of student diversity. Examining such issues could yield novel ways of improving schools.

### Conclusions

Belonging to strong social ties is a fundamental need, and securing strong and supportive relationships early on can provide bedrock for many positive outcomes in development. Experiencing and expressing gratitude can help improve youth moods, strengthen their social ties, and cultivate a sense of purposeful engagement with the world. Though such experiences are critical for healthy development, research on gratitude in youth or the development of gratitude is only now emerging. We have sought to review the literature on gratitude interventions for youth to bring into focus its relevance to students and schools. Gratitude can lead to many positive outcomes of central importance to children and adolescents—psychological well-being, satisfaction with school and with other domains, prosocial relationships—and it likely improves focus on priorities and fulfillment of meaningful goals. Thus, developing gratitude applications for students holds promise for catalyzing achievement and improving school bonding.

For instance, perhaps gratitude could be designed into existing programs (e.g., character and civic education) to enhance their effectiveness. Moreover, classes in English and writing might also benefit from the inclusion of gratitude and appreciation exercises; not only would such exercises help develop writing skills (given the social–emotional nuances involved in benefit exchanges), they may also motivate students to focus on their unique life stories and priorities, helping to forge their purpose.

In general, teachers can encourage appreciative responding in students by emphasizing and reinforcing kind acts in the classroom, and teachers and staff could model reciprocity and thankfulness in coordinated activities with students—all things parents can do at home, too. Would service learning be enhanced if students appreciated firsthand the gratitude of the people they help? The more youth are exposed to such behaviors and engaged in environments where balanced and supportive exchanges take place, the more likely they will develop a capacity for gratitude. The prospect that fostering gratitude in students could even have positive impacts that spread to the rest of the school underscores the value of gratitude for students and schools. At best, gratitude could help make schools places where youth and their potential are valued above all else and all the people (and communities) involved thrive, too.

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