Grateful kids are happier; so are their parents

By CAROLYN BUTLER - Special to The Washington Post

Thanking people is good manners and it may also lead to better, healthier lives.

"We know that grateful kids are happier and more satisfied with their lives," says Jeffrey Froh, an assistant professor of psychology at Hofstra University who focuses on the topic. "They report better relationships with friends and family, higher GPAs, less materialism, less envy and less depression, along with a desire to connect to their community and to want to give back." He adds that there's an even larger field of research on adults showing that being thankful has numerous psychological, social and even physical benefits such as lower blood pressure.

Luckily, it is possible to teach gratitude. One of Froh's studies found that early adolescents who simply "counted their blessings" in a journal every day for two weeks were more appreciative than those who didn't, as well as more optimistic and more satisfied with their lives.

In a forthcoming study, he and his co-authors also found that schoolchildren who were exposed to a specific “gratitude curriculum" reported more appreciation and happiness than those who didn't get the lessons, even up to five months later. They were also much more likely to act on their feelings, writing 80 percent more thank-you notes for a school event than the control group.

"Now we're talking actual behavior," says Froh, who notes that the research shows that such benefits are generally most pronounced in children who start out with a less sunny attitude.

Despite the obvious advantages, it can be challenging to raise grateful kids in today's society, with so much media focus on money, fame, status and the latest-and-greatest of everything. But that doesn’t mean it's not worth a try, says clinical psychologist Eleanor Mackey of Children's National Medical Center. "Generally speaking, it's like anything else: It takes time and energy to raise grateful kids, but if you make it a priority, it is doable, and the payoff can be enormous" in terms of healthier, more balanced young people.

Some expert advice to help you along the way:

Walk the walk: Above all, parents need to be good role models when it comes to expressing appreciation, whether that means thanking strangers for holding the door or thanking your son or daughter for a chore done without being asked. “Having the experience of being on the receiving end of gratitude can help children recognize that it’s a nice thing for people to feel like what they've done has been acknowledged,” Mackey said.
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Yes, sir. No, sir. Thank you, sir. Please.

Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. Thank you ma'am. Please.

Excuse me. I'm sorry.
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