



Helping Your Child Express Gratitude

by Jon Lasser, PhD



Gratitude is a complex experience of thoughts and feelings that we have in relationships with others. Psychologists believe that gratitude is an important part of our overall well-being and that having gratitude leads to greater happiness and better interpersonal relationships. Most children develop thoughts and feelings related to gratitude through social learning (i.e., observing gratitude expressed by others) and by having their own experiences of gratitude.

The development of gratitude also emerges with children's moral development. Along with physical growth and language development comes greater sophistication in evaluating the behaviors of others and making value judgments. Coupled with the growth in perspective-taking, this newly developed moral reasoning allows children to think about what others may have done for them and consequently experience gratitude for others.

There are lots of ways that adults can help children develop the cognitive, social, and emotional foundations of gratitude. The suggestions below can be adjusted to meet the varying developmental needs of children (e.g., an activity that calls for writing can be accomplished by drawing a picture or having the child dictate to the parent).

Foster authentic gratitude.

Gratitude isn't meaningful when it's not authentic, so try to avoid forcing expressions of thankfulness. Instead, encourage thoughtful reflection and allow grateful feelings to emerge. Rather than instructing your child to say thank you after a home-cooked meal, talk to them about the farming, cooking, and preparation processes that went into creating the meal. In this way, you can help your child evoke more genuine feelings of gratitude.

Create grateful art.

Get out some art materials and work with your child to make something creative around the theme of gratitude. For example, you and your child can cut out pictures from old magazines that represent things for which you are grateful and then glue the pictures to poster board. You can hang up your gratitude collage as a reminder of the things for which you're thankful. When doing this, let your child select his or her own pictures without direction from you, as gratitude is individualized and personal.

Make a gratitude visit.

This idea is adapted from the work of Dr. Martin Seligman, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Encourage your child to think of someone who has been kind and helpful to them. It may be a family member, a teacher, a neighbor, etc. Then ask your child to write (or dictate) a letter about how that person was helpful. Finally, take your child to deliver the letter of gratitude. This activity promotes not only reflection, but also the expression of feelings.

Volunteer with your child.

Select a community volunteer project that welcomes children, and spend some time engaged in helping others with your child. You and your child are likely to meet new people, be helpful, and experience the gratitude of others. Explain to your child that helping others is a fun way to share your time. You can find volunteer opportunities in your area at Serve.gov.

Express your gratitude as an example.

When children hear our thoughts and feelings, they learn about verbalizing internal states. The goal here is to help children understand that we can communicate to others what's going on inside, including feeling grateful. At dinner, you might say, "I'm so grateful for the farmer who grew this delicious broccoli!" As we mentioned earlier, gratitude ought to be authentic, so express it only when you're really feeling it. Similarly, don't place an expectation on children to reciprocate. They'll express their gratitude when they feel it and are ready to share it.

Talk about how kindness makes others feel.

Suppose you and your child are baking a cake for a family member. Encourage your child to predict how the recipient of the cake will feel. You might ask your child, "How will Mommy feel when we give this cake to her? What will she think?" To add a bit of humor, consider asking, "How would she feel if we gave her a dirty old shoe instead? What would she think?" The purpose of this is to facilitate your child's growth around perspective-taking and predicting the reactions of others. If we can learn how to behave in such a way that brings others joy, we can promote greater gratitude.

Identify gratitude when you see it.

Once you start looking for examples of gratitude, you're likely to see it everywhere. You can help your child by pointing out signs of kindness, helpful behaviors, and appreciation. Point out gratitude when you see it at the park, in books, at home, and at the grocery store. Encourage your child to look for signs of gratitude out in the world. You may cue them to look not only for things people say, but also facial expressions and body language.

Not feeling so grateful?

Sometimes it's hard to feel grateful, particularly when things are not going well in our lives. This is understandable, and we should avoid judging children who do not express gratitude. Should a child exhibit chronic irritability or a pervasive state of negative affect, you may consult a psychologist to determine whether professional help is needed. When a child experiences negative emotions, adults sometimes have a tendency to push those feelings away, but what children need most is to be certain that they are loved and understood.

This article was adapted from Grow Grateful by Sage Foster-Lasser and Jon Lasser, PhD