

# Teaching Gratitude

*By Jackie Block, MFT*

Gratitude comes with emotional maturity. Children are born self-centered and with time, as their needs are met, they learn the give and take of the world around them. It's important as parents that we show our children what being grateful looks like.

1. Utilize dinnertime, bedtime, downtime, or teaching moments as a time for you and your children to talk about what makes each of you grateful. Children, especially elementary school age, enjoy hearing your stories and place value on your opinions and insights regarding the world around them.
2. Decrease whining and negative behaviors in your children before they start. Make sure your child's emotional and physical needs are met. Make sure that you appreciate what they do and make sure they know they are appreciated. If children feel they can contribute to the family, they will be more open to acknowledging the contributions of others.
3. Teach your children by role-playing. Show the difference between acceptable ways of responding to disappointment and less effective ways like whining and having a tantrum.
4. Another tool to encourage responsibility and to teach appreciation is to have your children earn what they want by doing chores and working for the object before they get it. It instills pride and ownership when after several months of working for that prized object, your son or daughter takes their own money into the store, counts out the money to purchase what they wanted. It can also happen that with delayed gratification, your child may choose not to buy the object they first thought they wanted.
5. If you give your children an allowance, have them divide it into three groups, spending money, savings and charity. If you instill this value early on, you will be less likely to create children who will have overspending problems later on in life.
6. Have your children earn privileges. Whether it's watching a TV show, having a friend over or staying up an extra half-hour, it helps to make some opportunities conditional. Be clear with your expectations and follow through. It's also important to know that just because you CAN give your children everything, doesn't mean that it will help them if they have everything they want. You are setting your children up for some unrealistic expectations in their future.
7. Model thankfulness. Use "Thank you" often, speak kindly of others, and stand up for those who do not have a voice. This lesson goes a long way and instills a value that will last for years.
8. Write "thank-you" notes. Also, if your child receives a gift, have them write a note, draw a picture or sign their name to a note you've written.

9. As a family, offer to help at a local food pantry, bring dinner to a neighbor in need, visit a local nursing home and encourage your children to give their gently used toys and jackets to charity.

10. Have your children make a list of things they would like to give to others. Even if they are unattainable, have your children share their list of wishes with that person.

11. Teach appreciation of nature. As the saying goes “stop and smell the roses.”

12. Focus on time and attention. It is not what we have that makes us who we are. The time we spend and the attention we give is our most important gift. Therefore, make sure that game night happens, that your children can help with setting the dinner table, doing the yard work or anything else that helps them feel they can contribute. The conversations you will have during these moments may be some of your most important ones.

Some people are more gracious in sharing their gratitude. Some people never mature enough. We all have known people who have had difficult lives, yet they see the beauty of life and share their appreciation often. Remember them when it is difficult for you to be thankful. Be patient with your children. As they mature, they will learn the importance of giving thanks as you encourage them to have thankful hearts.

### **The Benefits of Gratitude**

With Thanksgiving coming up this month, we are reminded to pause for a moment and think about all the reasons we have to be thankful. Thanksgiving can be more than just a nice tradition. Research has shown that an attitude of gratitude can be beneficial for your mental health as well.

Studies have found that people who keep gratitude journals or make lists of things to be grateful for on a weekly basis are more optimistic about their lives and the upcoming week than people who wrote about hassles or neutral life events in their journals. They also reported higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, optimism, and lower levels of depression and stress. Grateful people do not deny or ignore the negative aspects of life but tend to experience more pleasant feelings overall than ungrateful people.

### **Do This Daily To Increase Thankfulness**

1. Wake up and remember 5 things you are thankful for
2. Tell the people closest to you what you appreciate about them every day
3. Set a goal to say at least 5 positive things to the ones you love for each negative
4. Slow down and look for the positives; give others the benefit of the doubt

