

Helping your Child be Thankful: Fostering an Attitude of Gratitude

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Kids can be self-centered. It's normal for them to think first about themselves, despite all of our efforts to help them be more empathetic or appreciative.

The good news, though, is that we can help them broaden their perspectives and see beyond themselves. We can help them think about others, and help them approach life with an attitude of gratitude.

Here are a few suggestions for fostering thankfulness in your kids even after Thanksgiving is over:

1. Teach Gratitude by Setting an Example.

This point might seem obvious, but how often do we complain about little things during the day? If we realize that the things that make life hard on us (like mounds of laundry) are frequently the fallout from our blessings (having loved ones to care for), it's easier to feel grateful and to share it with our kids. We can transform our grumbles into thanks by saying things like, "Yes, we do need to clean up the house, but aren't we lucky to have a house to keep us safe and warm?" or "I'm disappointed that we didn't get to go see grandma today, but isn't it great we get to live close to her and see her often?"

2. Reward Thankfulness.

When they say "Thanks, Mom!" stop what you're doing, get eye-level with them, give them a hug, and tell them how much you appreciate their appreciation. Something like: "It makes me so happy when you say thank-you! It makes me want to take you to do more fun things!" If we consistently delight in their gratitude, it will reinforce this behavior and they'll do it more often.

3. Give them a Reality Check.

We don't necessarily want to traumatize our kids by making them watch videos of babies from third worlds starving to death, but we can challenge their assumptions about the things they take for granted. Simple comments can teach our children that they have much more than many others. For example, when they're taking a warm bath you might discuss with them the fact that some families don't even have clean water in their houses.

4. Help Them Give to Others.

Give them the opportunity to give to others and make someone else happy and grateful. Help them choose and support a cause that they feel is important, like donating a food-producing animal to a family, making blankets for foster children, or protecting wildlife. Also, tell them about the things you do to help others. Many parents give charitably in many ways but don't tell their kids about it. Talk about how the small things your family is doing can make a big difference to someone else, and how it makes them feel when someone shows them gratitude. You can also do this on a much smaller scale, like when they share a toy or comfort another child. During these moments you can talk about how happy they made the other child: "Did you see how big she smiled when you gave her your ball? How did that make your heart feel when she thanked you?"

5. Create Rituals for Giving Thanks.

Your family may already participate in certain holiday rituals at Thanksgiving each year, like having everyone say what they are thankful for. Or some families have everyone write down what they're

thankful for on a paper leaf and save them year after year with the person's name and year written on it. (If you get really industrious, you can hole-punch and laminate them, and string them around the house at Thanksgiving for everyone to read about thanks from years past.) These holiday rituals are important, but you can also create more frequent appreciation rituals through daily prayer, dinner conversations, and bedtime routines.

By focusing on all that you and your kids have to be grateful for, you can use everyday moments to make gratitude and thankfulness a part of your family's daily life. Simple comments like "Isn't it a beautiful day?" or "Aren't we lucky to have each other in our family?" or "Warm jammies feel so nice on a cold night!" will help foster in your children an awareness of how much they have to be thankful for.

And with your new thankful mindset, you can even be grateful for your child's creativity the next time you're scrubbing the ketchup "finger-painting" off of the walls. (OK. Maybe that's too much gratitude for any of us to expect from ourselves.)