

Gratitude as a Daily Practice

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At this time of year, we are encouraged to think about and express what we are grateful for. Whether it is during a classroom discussion, a sermon on the Sunday before Thanksgiving or around the table before the turkey is carved, we are asked what we are thankful for. Having gratitude is a worthy endeavor. But should it be reserved for only certain times of the year.

All parents want their children to be grateful for their blessings in life. Studies have shown that parents usually focus on what being grateful looks like or what we do to express that gratitude. For example, saying thank you for a gift received or a meal that we prepared. However, in a Raising Grateful Kids project conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, they discovered that gratitude as an experience has four parts:

What we NOTICE in our lives for which we can be grateful

How we THINK about why we have been given those things

How we FEEL about the things we have been given

What we DO to express appreciation in turn

As we find ways to incorporate it into our daily life, we can model ways to notice, think, feel and express gratitude. It can be a part of our dinner conversations or bedtime routine. You can play the Rose and Thorn game, where each person tells about one rose (a good thing) and one thorn (a challenging thing).

Show appreciation by conveying you paid attention to real effort in your child: "Your room looks so nice with the toys in their bins. I'm so happy that you remembered to put them away!"

Set expectations when shopping by saying, "Today is a 'look' day. Just like going to the museum, we enjoy the beautiful things, but we aren't planning to buy anything today." And of course, let your children know when it is a 'buy' day.

Thank those who serve. Your example of acknowledging those who quietly make a difference in your life, from the bus driver to the person sweeping up the aftermath of a family lunch out, sends a powerful message to your children.

Have them pitch in when they want something. If your kids get an allowance or earn money at a job, have them participate in buying some of the things they want. When kids themselves take the time to save up, they have an ownership stake in the purchase and gain an understanding of the value of a dollar by working toward what they want. It also teaches restraint and encourages kids to appreciate what they have, as well as giving them a more realistic perspective on what you and others do for them.

And be a grateful parent. What an invaluable exercise it is to tell our kids why we're grateful to have them! It goes without saying that we love our kids, and that we're thankful beyond words for their love, their smiles, their hugs and so much more. When we tell them what makes them special to us, their self-esteem is boosted for the right reasons (not because they have the latest smartphone or because they're dressed fashionably). Plus, our example shows them that gratitude extends well beyond material things.