

What Parents Neglect to Teach about Gratitude



Research suggests that the experience of gratitude has four parts, but we rarely teach all of them to our kids.

BY ANDREA HUSSONG | NOVEMBER 21, 2017

Some parenting experiences are nearly universal. The wonder of an infant's first smile. The excitement of a toddler's first wobbly steps. And the pride in hearing these two words come out of your child's mouth without you first having to nudge them along: "Thank you."

But what does gratitude mean *in children*? Most early studies of children's gratitude focus on acts of appreciation. For example, in one classic 1976 study, researchers made audio recordings of children on their Halloween rounds and found that 11- to 16-year-olds were four times more likely to say "thanks" for the candy than six-year-olds.



Today, psychologists studying gratitude note that being grateful means much more than just saying thank you. Not only is the experience and expression of gratitude broader than thanking others but it requires children to use a set of complex socio-emotional skills. For example, researchers at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Greensboro argue that gratitude in children involves perspective taking and emotional knowledge, skills that children begin to develop more quickly around ages three to five.

In the Raising Grateful Children project at UNC Chapel Hill, we've explored gratitude experiences with families as their children have grown from kindergarteners to young teens. Based on the scientific literature and our conversations with parents, we've come to think about gratitude as an experience that 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

Older children and adults are more likely to spontaneously engage in all four parts of gratitude, but younger children may only engage in some of these parts, only when prompted. Children may show more gratitude as they gain cognitive skills, collect practice with those skills, and begin to connect the NOTICE-THINK-FEEL parts of experiencing gratitude with the DO part of expressing gratitude.

This model emphasizes that gratitude is about how we receive things in the world as well as how we give to others. Indeed, when it comes to children, our team expects that helping them learn to deeply receive things in their lives will help engender genuine experiences of gratitude. These experiences, in turn, may motivate the appreciative behaviors that parents want to see in their children.

How kids learn to give thanks

In addition, the four parts of gratitude give parents several options for how they can help their children learn about gratitude.

Over a ten-day period, we asked 100 parents to tell us how they had tried to foster gratitude in their six- to nine-year-old children on that day. Some of these behaviors focused on how parents encourage their children to show gratitude,

like reminding them to say thank you or expressing thanks in ways that go beyond words. The rest of the behaviors focused on what children noticed, thought about, or felt about things they received.

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What we found is that parents, like the first gratitude researchers, focused on what children DO to show gratitude. Most parents (85 percent) spurred their children to say thank you and show gratitude in ways consistent with good manners. A smaller portion (39 percent) encouraged children to show gratitude in ways that went beyond good manners. About half of parents said they had pointed out to their children that they had received something (a NOTICE behavior). But even fewer parents asked children about how a gift made them feel (a FEEL behavior reported by only a third of parents) or why they thought someone had given them a gift (a

THINK behavior reported by 22 percent of parents).

We think children may be understanding what is important about gratitude based on their parents' behaviors. These behavioral messages may in turn shape how children show gratitude.

When parents reported on how often they saw the types of gratitude in their children using these same daily diaries, what children DO to show gratitude won out over what they NOTICE-THINK-FEEL. Almost all parents reported that their children show well-mannered gratitude (like saying "thank you") on any given day of the study, whereas only half said that their children show gratitude in ways that went beyond "good manners." Many parents (over 60 percent) said that

their children NOTICE things in their lives for which they could be grateful or connect positive feelings to the experience of receiving. Less than half, however, reported that their children thought about the reasons why someone gave them a gift in a way that engenders gratitude.

Questions that foster gratitude

These findings suggest that there are opportunities for fostering gratitude in children that many parents have yet to tap. Finding ways to help children more deeply notice what they have received is an important place to start. But helping them make sense of those gifts, through their thoughts and feelings, may be key to experiences of gratitude more specifically.

How can parents do that? By asking questions. Here are some examples of **NOTICE-THINK-FEEL-DO** questions parents may ask children about their gratitude experiences.



NOTICE: What have you been given or what do you already have in your life for which you are grateful? Are there gifts behind the material gifts for which you are grateful, like someone thinking about you or caring about you enough to give you the gift?



THINK: Why do you think you received this gift? Do you think you owe the giver something in return? Do you think you earned the gift because of something you did yourself? Do you think the gift was something the giver had to give you? If you answered no to these questions, then you may be more likely to be grateful.



FEEL: Does it make you feel happy to get this gift? What does that feel like inside? What about the gift makes you feel happy? These questions help the child connect their positive feeling to the gifts that they receive in their lives.



DO: Is there a way you want to show how you feel about this gift? Does the feeling you have about this gift make you want to share that feeling by giving something to someone else? Prompting children after experiences of gratitude in order to motivate acts of gratitude, whether they be acts of appreciation or paying it forward, may help children connect their experiences and actions in the world.

We think that these types of questions may help children to more deeply receive gifts from others or notice what they already have in the world. In turn, we think that deeply receiving may motivate acts of gratitude toward others. And that will give parents reasons to feel proud of children who not only say thank you unprompted but, more importantly, mean it.

About the Author

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