

Seven Ways to Foster Gratitude in Kids

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Research has shown that gratitude plays a major role in an adult's well-being and success, but there has been little corresponding research addressing its development and enhancement in children's lives. In fact, until 2005, we know of no studies that examined gratitude and well-being in young children. Then, in 2006, psychologists Nansook Park and Christopher Peterson conducted [an analysis](#) of parents' descriptions of their children's strengths—and found that gratitude had the strongest relationship to life satisfaction.

In more recent years, two long-term studies have shown why gratitude may be particularly beneficial to youngsters.

One study linked gratitude to greater social support and protection from stress and depression over time. A [second study](#), involving gift-giving in sororities, showed that beneficiaries (new pledges) were most grateful when they felt understood, valued, and cared for by a benefactor (veteran sisters), and that this predicted a sense of connection to each other and to the sorority overall.

These results suggest that gratitude not only helps people form, maintain, and strengthen supportive relationships, but it also helps people feel connected to a caring community.

Evidence from our [own research](#) suggests that grateful young adolescents (ages 11-13), compared to their less grateful counterparts, are happier and more optimistic, have better social support, are more satisfied with their school, family, community, friends, and themselves, and give more emotional support to others. We've also [found](#) that grateful teens (ages 14-19) are more satisfied with their lives, use their strengths to better their community, are more engaged in their schoolwork and hobbies, have higher grades, and are less envious, depressed, and materialistic.

Knowing the benefits that practicing gratitude bestows on kids begs the question: How can we foster more gratitude in children? From our experience as researchers and as parents ourselves, we believe that gratitude is born of a loving connection and grows from a loving connection. When parents tune into an infant's needs and curiosities and satisfy the infant patiently with love, they're planting the seeds for gratitude to grow. Our book, [Making Grateful Kids](#), contains 32 concrete, scientifically-based strategies for encouraging gratitude in children—that is, appreciation for when somebody has done something kind or helpful for them or recognition of the good things and people they have in their lives. While each strategy is important in isolation, here are seven essential themes that underlie the strategies.

1. Model and teach gratitude

Our children want to be like us. We provide the blueprint for what to say and what to do and in what contexts. Expressing gratitude through words, writing, and small gifts or acts of reciprocity are all ways to teach children how to become grateful. Doing this will help make your appreciation for the goodness in your life more public, showing your kids

that blessings abound and that being thankful is a valued attitude. Adults can promote gratitude directly in children by helping them appraise the benefits they receive from others—the personal value of those benefits, the altruistic intention of people providing them, and the cost to those people. This helps kids think gratefully.

2. Spend time with your kids and be mindful when with them

Another way to spell love is T-I-M-E. Believe it or not, children and, yes, even adolescents, like being with their parents. Giving a child a lot of quality time with you teaches them the language of love—life’s greatest gift. Savor every moment together, big and small, and rid yourself of distractions at such times, including your smartphone. Being mindful helps you maintain empathy toward a child, and this provides important modeling of empathy, the most important emotion for developing gratitude and moral behavior. It will also give you and your child a heightened sense of appreciation for the things both of you love and for your relationship.

3. Support your child’s autonomy

Using an authoritative or democratic parenting style, which is firm, yet flexible, supports children’s autonomy. This will enhance family relationships, improve the atmosphere at home, and help bring out their strengths and talents, all good for making grateful kids. By taking ownership over their skills and talents and being responsible for developing them, children gain things to appreciate in life and make it easier to attract support from others, thus inviting gratitude into their daily life. Also, limiting children’s media consumption and guiding them to use media in prosocial ways protects them from commercial influences that discourage the development of the authenticity, self-development, and social interaction necessary to grow into positive, purposeful, grateful individuals.

4. Use kids’ strengths to fuel gratitude

After you’ve identified your children’s top strengths and you know their unique strengths profile, you should encourage and help them to use those strengths whenever possible. Not only does this open up opportunities for others to contribute to the things your children love, but it also enables your children to strengthen their ability to be helpful and cooperative toward others, which will make them more grateful. To directly promote gratitude, encourage and help your children to use their strengths to thank and be kind to others.

5. Help focus and support kids to achieve intrinsic goals

It’s very easy for people, especially youth, to pursue extrinsic—or materialistic—goals such as desiring or having possessions that show wealth, status, or convey a certain image. This usually leads to less fulfilling social relationships and forecloses prospects for developing deep connections with others and genuine gratitude. It’s our job to steer them away from pursuing extrinsic goals and toward pursuing intrinsic goals, such as engaging in activities that provide community, affiliation, and growth. Not only will successfully achieving these goals fulfill children’s fundamental human needs of competency, belongingness, and autonomy, but their personal development, happiness,

success, and gratitude depend on it. To amplify their gratitude even more, remember to savor their accomplishments with them along the way, and encourage them to thank those who've helped them meet their goals.

6. Encourage helping others and nurturing relationships

Helping others and being generous are two key ingredients for making grateful kids. When children lend a hand, especially while using their strengths, they feel more connected to those they're helping, which helps them to develop and nurture friendships and social relationships. A great way to do this is by teaching them through your actions that other people matter and that tending to relationships should be a priority. To help children strengthen their relationships, you should encourage them to be thoughtful of others, to thank others regularly, and to be cooperative, helpful, and giving.

7. Help kids find what matters to them

Having a sense of purpose in life gives youth a compass for creating a meaningful life. As adults, it's our job to help kids discover their passions and to find a path to purpose that resonates with them— with their values, interests, and dreams. This starts with feeding their interests in the social issues they care about and pushing them to learn as much as they can about those issues and discover ways they can make a difference. The deepest sense of gratitude in life comes from connecting to a bigger picture, to an issue that matters to others and doing things that contribute to society down the road.

Trying to make grateful kids isn't just an issue for families; it's an issue for society as well. Society desperately needs to harness the power of gratitude. As our world becomes more culturally diverse and digitally connected, and as complex societal problems mount, gratitude may help catalyze the motivation and skills youth need to succeed not just academically but in the "life test" too. We must all do our part to help kids develop into moral adults, who will contribute to a world of compassion and care. But, while there's no quick fix for cultivating gratitude in young people, the more we remain committed to it, the more rewards we'll reap. Indeed, by bringing out the best in our kids, we can only imagine what blessings Generation Grateful could bring. Anything worthwhile takes a lot of time and effort. It's up to all of us to make it happen.