

Helping Children Receive Gifts Gratefully and Graciously

Your children are likely to receive gifts from loving family and friends. But how well-prepared are they to express their gratitude appropriately and to appreciate the kindness of the gift-giver, whatever is inside the package? Here is Marti's advice on helping your child develop both gratitude and grace:

I. Underlying issues

- Very young children are by nature self-centered. They need good examples and direct guidance to help them become more aware of other people's feelings and more grateful for what others do for them.
- During the holidays, we adults tend to reinforce that self-centeredness by asking, "What do you want this year?" and by letting children be bombarded with ads that feed into that "gimme, gimme" mentality.
- But this is an opportunity to teach children important lessons in gratefulness and gracious behavior that extend well beyond the holiday season.

II. Tips for parents

- Set an example of gratefulness
Say thank you to friends and family members for helpful things they do; have your child see you writing thank you notes or making a thank you phone call when you receive a gift; have a "gratitude moment" during family dinner, asking each family member to name something they're grateful for that day.
- Have children write thank you notes right away
Some people say this is an old-fashioned idea and that people today are too busy to write thank you notes. But it can be a good lesson in empathy to focus a child's attention on the time and effort that went in to choosing and wrapping a gift. Is that person's time less valuable than the child's? No! So let's take time to write a nice note – or, for a young child, draw a colorful picture – to send to the gift-giver. As a fun variation, especially for a loved one who lives far away, a video thank you sent via e-mail can be a good option for a young child.
- Focus on the giver's thoughtfulness
Even if the gift isn't exactly what the child wanted, the intentions of the gift-giver are something for which to be grateful. Remind children of this ahead of gift-opening time and maybe even practice ways to thank someone for their kindness, whatever the gift. Even in casual comments, be mindful of focusing on the kindness of the giver more than the material gift.
- Engage children in giving to others
One of the best ways to help children be grateful receivers is to help them be loving, thoughtful givers. Instead of asking children what they hope Santa will bring them, consider asking, "What have you planned to give or make for your sister (or grandparent or uncle)?" Encourage them to use a portion of their allowance or money they earn doing special chores to buy a gift for a needy child. Take on a family service project during the year, making a difference in the lives of others.