

Making Thanksgiving an Everyday Way of Being

As we gather with family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving this week, we would do well to think about how to make each day one of thanksgiving. In the midst of our busy lives – and especially in a culture that often leads our kids to say, “Give me, give me!” – how can we instill in our children a spirit of gratitude for all things, large and small? Here are Marti’s practical tips for raising thankful kids:

I. Background

Many times we adults complain that children and teens don’t appreciate anything – that they’re spoiled, ungrateful and take things (and us!) for granted. But rarely do we stop and think about the fact that **gratefulness is a learned behavior**. In many ways – every day – we are teaching our children to be grateful or NOT! It’s important to start early, when children are just toddlers, to teach not only manners, like saying “please” and “thank you,” but to help children be mindful of what they have and what others do for them. As children get older, the lessons become even more important, moving toward a larger view of the freedoms and opportunities for which we all should be grateful.

II. Four tips for parents

1) Set an example of thankfulness

Say thank you when a family member or friend does something for you. Let your kids see you write thank you notes, even just a text or e-mail for simple things, but handwritten cards for special gifts or favors. Keep thank you cards and stamps on hand and help your kids write notes or, if they’re toddlers, draw a picture. This is not just about teaching children manners, but helping them learn to recognize the kindness of others. Also be mindful of your own grumbling, complaining or thoughtlessness; what message are you giving your kids about your own sense of gratitude?

2) Establish a daily “thanksgiving ritual”

With younger children, develop a bedtime routine of having them name the best thing that happened that day. Or have them express thanks for someone who helped make their day better. For the whole family, make it a dinnertime habit for everyone to name one thing for which they are thankful. (Teens may roll their eyes, but don’t let that stop you. Who knows, they probably will do the same ritual with their own kids someday!) If your child names a person who did something thoughtful, encourage your child to thank that person the next day, if he or she didn’t already do so.

3) Avoid over-indulging your children

It’s natural for parents to want to make their children happy, but when we give into children’s every desire (especially with material things), we give our kids a sense of entitlement. Instead, help them focus on appreciating the things and opportunities they already have. With tweens and teens, encourage them to wait, work and save for things that are really important to them. This way they learn the value of things, develop a sense of accomplishment and feel more grateful when you or others do choose to give them something special.

4) Engage your children in contributing, in the family and beyond

From the earliest ages, expect children to contribute to the smooth running of the household by being responsible for their own space and possessions and sharing in daily chores. For a very young child, this might mean putting toys away after playtime, putting their dirty clothes in the hamper at bedtime and helping to set the table. For tweens and teens, they can do dishes, help with meal preparation, take out the garbage, fold laundry, dust and vacuum. (Their future roommates or spouses will be grateful to you for teaching them!) As a family, reach out to others through volunteer service, working in a soup kitchen, mentoring a child, helping in the church nursery, collecting warm clothes for families in a shelter, shoveling the walks for an elderly neighbor – whatever is needed in your community. It is through contributing to the wellbeing of others that children (and adults!) become most grateful for their own wellbeing and the people who have contributed to it.

Marti Erickson, Ph.D.

Owner & Co-host, Mom Enough®

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