

10 Ways to Teach Your Child Gratitude - Plus Tips for Teens

Posted by Erin Walsh • November 19, 2013

I just wrote a post about the [science behind gratitude](#). It turns out that far from being a nice afterthought, gratitude is central to our kids' health and happiness. But you can't just tell your child to be grateful. Gratitude practices are nurtured over time. Here are ten ways to start teaching your child gratitude:

- **Start a daily gratitude tradition.** Go around the dinner table and share something that you are grateful for that day or incorporate it into bedtime routine. For little kids, you might ask "What is one thing that you liked about today?" Another variation on this theme: When I led wilderness canoe trips, we closed each day by talking about Roses (best part of the day), Thorns (hardest part), and Buds (what we look forward to tomorrow). It was lovely.
- **Give thanks.** Encourage your child to write their own thank you notes and give them in person when possible.
- **Try a gratitude journal.** This is a great practice all the way from toddler scribblings to teen reflections.
- **Lead by example.** Be sure to thank your child and others around you and explain why you are grateful for them.
- **Use gift giving as a time for learning.** Rather than buying presents for your kids' friends and putting your child's name on it - engage them in the process.
- **Give children responsibility.** When kids learn through

experience how much work it is to rake the lawn (for example), they are more likely to be grateful when you do it. Or notice how hard it might be for an elderly neighbor to do so and offer a hand.

- **Tame the "gimmes."** Give your child everything they need but not everything they want. Giving in to the "gimmes" breeds entitlement.
- **Direct their focus.** Be mindful of what you focus on together with your child. Do you take time to notice how beautiful the trees are? Point out and focus on the simple things around you together with your child.
- **Celebrate mistakes.** Gratitude isn't about documenting perfection. Gratitude can be the most helpful when things don't go as planned or when things are difficult. Acknowledge and validate feelings of frustration or sadness but also help your child see what can be learned from the situation.
- **Expect kids to volunteer.** Gratitude is not about "feeling sorry" for others. Getting involved in community projects and volunteer work is important but be sure to ask not only what your child can give to others but what they can learn from others through this process as well.

What about teens? Adolescence can be seen as a self-absorbed time in life but it is also a time of great transformation when young people are opening up to the world around them and figuring out who they want to be. Gratitude helps teens be more resilient as they travel on the rocky and exhilarating road from childhood to adulthood. Here are a couple of tips for nurturing gratitude in teens:

- **Don't give up.** You may need to modify family gratitude traditions or let your teen shape them, but don't abandon them completely.

They are likely more important to your teen than you know.

- **Gratitude is a practice, not a script.** Avoid "correcting" your teen if he or she expresses gratitude about something that doesn't meet your expectations. It is okay if your teen goes in and out of taking gratitude seriously around you.
- **Modeling still matters.** While they may never tell you this, your actions still matter. A lot. Practice gratitude.
- **Change what you are looking for.** Your teen may no longer want to hold your hand and say "I'm grateful for..." but look for other ways that they are acting grateful through their actions towards others, their language, and if they are getting involved in community or school issues.
- **Give credit to others.** Teens are vulnerable to the "self-serving bias" which means that when something good happens they think it is because of them and when something bad happens they blame the circumstances or someone else. Encourage them to think of how others have helped them succeed *and* to take responsibility for their own actions.
- **Expand the conversation.** Talk to your teen things like rights versus privileges and equity versus justice. Gratitude calls on us to be more aware of our relationships with others.

* Dr. Christine Carter has some other great tips for teaching teens gratitude [here](#).