

The Power of Gratitude in Parenting

Boredom, confusion, frustration—the attentional demands of parenting may grate on us at times. Use this handy mindful checklist to connect with gratitude during difficult parenting moments.

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I despise making school lunches. Each morning, I stumble through the motions of slicing cucumbers, rinsing berries, and filling water bottles, all the while feeling irritable and even slightly resentful. The lunches aren't particularly challenging to assemble — my daughters are content with mild variations on the theme of sandwich, fruit, veggies, and a salty, crunchy

snack.

Even so, I can't stand it. There's no good reason for my annoyance, but there it is every morning, as dependable as the sunrise and my daughters' hunger rages if I don't put enough food in their lunch bags.

And then one morning a thought suddenly popped into my mind, emerging unbidden through the cloud of crankiness.

I am so lucky.

Within seconds, those four words bloomed throughout my awareness, and all I could think about was how lucky I am. I am so lucky to live in a home with electricity, running water, and a functional refrigerator. I am so lucky to live near a grocery store with a plentiful selection of fresh food and snacks, to live in a world where pre-packaged pretzels and reusable ice-packs exist — and to have enough money to afford them. I am so lucky to have the physical ability to get myself out of bed, walk down the stairs, and make their lunches. I am so lucky to have two daughters who are healthy enough to eat and digest the food I send with them.

I am so damn lucky.

I can't tell you where this sudden burst of [gratitude](#) came from, but I do know this: that small shift in perspective immediately made my morning lunch routine immensely easier. Rather than feeling frustrated and annoyed, I felt calm and present. Rather than mentally grumbling my way through the morning, I was able to appreciate my situation.

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I had found the mental salve to my morning moodiness. Now, whenever I notice my internal annoyance ramping up, I respond with gratitude.

I am so grateful for peanut butter. Thank goodness for this magical source of protein that my daughters will actually eat. And jelly, sweet, sweet, jelly. I can't forget sliced bread — oh, the magic of sliced bread! Imagine if I had to cut those slices myself each morning? What a mess that would be.

Don't get me wrong — I still don't enjoy making lunches, but the process doesn't feel like such a struggle when I remember to be grateful. It gives me just enough space from my cranky brain to choose a different response to whatever is going on.

Five Ways Gratitude Can Make Parenting Easier

Gratitude has become one of my go-to responses to difficult parenting situations, and not just during mundane or unpleasant tasks. Here are few other times:

1. When I'm completely exhausted and just can't deal. Whenever this happens, I am at high risk of throwing my own private pity party, which doesn't help anything. A moment of gratitude shuts that party down so I can get clear on what I need to do and get through the rest of the day.

2. Whenever my girls get sick or injured, my thoughts start spinning. I waver between [worrying](#) about their health and stressing about the work I won't get done. Reminding myself of all I have to be grateful for — that they aren't sicker, that we have access to pediatric emergency rooms, skilled doctors, and health insurance — halts my mind's cycle of rumination (which only augments stress and worry) and helps me get steady on my feet again so I can do what's needed — not just stress in circles.

3. When I'm anxious about the future. My daughter's health is just one of the many issues that trigger my anxiety — the full list could fill a

library. [Anxiety](#) thrives in future thinking — gratitude lives in the present. When I focus on everything there is to appreciate in the here and now, my anxiety decreases dramatically.

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4. When I can't help but imagine the worst. I have an incredible ability to catastrophize my way through almost any experience, even the positive ones. It's as if I'm in constant Cinderella mode — the more beautiful the shoe is, the more I worry about the other one dropping. Focusing on all that I have to be grateful for helps me savor the best moments of parenting, rather than getting caught up in [imagining the worst](#).

5. When I'm distracted. I try to stay as present as I can for my kids, but sometimes it's hard. It's hard because parenting can be boring or infuriating or confusing or downright gross. Sometimes I can bring myself back with a few deep breaths, but other times I need a stronger anchor. Gratitude is that anchor.

How to Be Grateful When Parenting is Grating on You

One of the many cool things about [gratitude](#) is that the more you practice it, the more easily it will come to you. Before you know it, you'll be grateful to be covered in toddler vomit at 2 AM. And yes, toddler vomit at 2 AM totally sucks, but at least you're not adding to the suckage.

When I'm at the end of my tether, I often add a little humor, hence, I've created a mental cue with the acronym GRATE — a way to inspire feelings of gratitude when parenting starts to grate on me:

G — Gratitude: Remember that gratitude is a go-to practice in difficult moments.

R — Realize: Realize that you're in a negative headspace — this is the first and crucial step toward an [attitude](#) adjustment.

A — Appreciate: Find something to appreciate. Anything, really. If you're struggling, here are a few options to get you started:

1. Your teeth didn't just spontaneously fall out of your face. (Or maybe just noticing them now gave you an opportunity to unclench your jaw or anywhere else you might be holding tension in your face.)
2. You don't have a massive sinkhole in the middle of your kitchen.
3. Toilet paper. (I once spent an entire summer using newspaper. Don't ask. Just be grateful.)
4. Gravity. Oh, beautiful, dependable, gravity. (You think toddler vomit is bad? Try FLOATING toddler vomit. Yeah. Um. No.)
5. You are still breathing. This ain't nothing, people. Take a few [deep breaths](#) if for no other reason than you can.

T — Thank you. Send a little mental or verbal shout-out to whoever you want: the universe, your pediatrician, spouse, car, or cat, the stranger who gave you back your daughter's pacifier when she dropped it, or even your kitchen floor for not suddenly opening up under your feet.

E — Enjoy the moment: Enjoy the moment of peace and calm — it won't be long before your kids give you another opportunity to practice gratitude. Again.