

# How to Teach Gratitude to Tweens and Teens

"Thanks! A Strengths-Based Curriculum" features lessons to help students understand the meaning of gratitude and cultivate it in their everyday lives.

## About the Author

You can't teach gratitude practices in a vacuum—especially to teens. As a former high school teacher, I can imagine eyes rolling and arms crossing during a lecture on the value of an attitude of gratitude. Simply asking students to share three things they are grateful for might also trigger understandable resistance.

Teens tend to respond more positively to lessons and activities that help them understand themselves and connect with peers—and this is what researcher Giacomo Bono and his team kept in mind as they designed "Thanks! A Strengths-Based Curriculum." A special four-lesson version of this curriculum is now available on the [Greater Good Science Center's website](#), free to the public—and it offers insights for authentically nurturing gratitude in your students.

# Why gratitude is good for youth

Although gratitude, as a social emotion, has long been considered a powerful ingredient of health and well-being for both individuals and societies, for a long time no systematic attempt had ever been made to deeply explore its development in youth.

However, initial [research](#) demonstrated that, when compared with their less grateful (and more materialistic) peers, grateful youth are happier and more satisfied with their lives, friends, family, neighborhood, and selves. They also report more hope, greater engagement with their hobbies, higher GPAs—and less envy and depression.

That's why the Greater Good Science Center launched the Youth Gratitude Project (YGP), as part of the broader Expanding the Science and Practice of Gratitude, a multi-year initiative funded by the [John Templeton Foundation](#). YGP seeks to understand the keys to—and benefits of—developing gratitude in youth, while also shedding light on ways to measure it.

The main idea behind Thanks! and other YGP curricula is that varied gratitude practices should help students feel more socially competent and connected, be more satisfied with school, have better mental health and emotional well-being, and be more motivated about school and their future. Pilot

studies of the curriculum are promising, and researchers are planning to refine and test it widely to see what other benefits it might bring.

## How gratitude builds relationships

In describing the design of his curriculum, Bono writes, "Gratitude interventions...should let students appreciate the different benefits and benefactors in their lives for themselves. Let's go beyond lists and dry journals. When people 'get' us and help us through tough times, [gratitude grows](#)."

As students learn gratitude, they are also learning about the concepts of intention and benefit: how others deliberately take actions that make our lives better, inspiring us to feel grateful. As Bono and gratitude researcher Jeffrey Froh explain:

- Acts of kindness that inspire gratitude are usually done on purpose, with intention. Someone has noticed us, thought about what we need, and chosen to do something to meet that need. Reflecting on the intentions behind these acts deepens our sense of gratitude.
- Each act of kindness has a cost to the person who performs it. The cost may include time, effort, or something that was given up, as well as any financial cost. When we understand those costs, we gain a deeper appreciation of the person who acted in a caring way.

- Others' acts of kindness benefit us personally in ways that may be material, emotional, or social. Noticing and acknowledging the ways we benefit from others' actions enhances our gratitude.

In the Thanks! curriculum, for example, one of the activities asks students to write thank you cards to people who believed in them, making sure to note what the person did that was so meaningful, what kind of effort it required, and how they benefitted.

## Three keys to teaching gratitude

To nurture a more genuine exploration of gratitude, Bono's curriculum incorporates three processes that are key to teen development—a challenging and potentially rewarding stage of life.

**Exploring identity.** Identity development remains the central developmental task for adolescents, and this curriculum helps facilitate that by allowing students to explore their [character strengths](#) (e.g., traits like honesty, curiosity, perseverance, humility). Students join their teacher in taking an online assessment, tallying their virtues as a group, and creating posters that display these aspects of who they are. If they score highly in "creativity," they might consider writing poetry or composing music. If they score highly in "kindness," they

might think about how to inspire others to be kind, as well.

**Capitalizing on strengths.** A gratitude curriculum that builds on strengths is a wonderful counter to [focusing on students' perceived deficits](#). When teachers have the opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge strengths by displaying and sharing students' individual posters in class, students can take pride in that visual reminder. Then, teachers can draw on students' strengths to nurture peer relationships in the classroom.

**Building positive relationships.** Once they know their strengths, students can leverage them to connect more deeply with others and to do good—in school and beyond. For example, they might acknowledge and appreciate each other's strengths as they play out during a given school day. One activity in the curriculum centers around students leaving Post-It "Thanks" on each other's posters (e.g., "Thanks for your help on the assignment; you showed teamwork" or "I really loved your jokes yesterday; your humor cheered me up.")

Of course, as I said from the start, you can't just impose gratitude exercises on teens—particularly those who suffer from illness, family upheavals like divorce, the loss of a loved one, abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, discrimination, or poverty. If teens don't receive a lot of support from the adults in their lives, they may have difficulty feeling a lot of gratitude.

If this is the case, it's crucial to listen with sensitivity, empathize, and acknowledge students' feelings.

However, because this curriculum is contextualized around student identity, character strengths, and positive peer relationships, it has the potential to affirm students and strengthen pride in their achievements. These lessons could provide a worthy starting point for building a positive classroom community and generating more authentic, relationship-building experiences of gratitude at school.