How to Raise More Grateful Children

A sense of entitlement is a big problem among young people today, but it's possible to teach gratitude

ILLUSTRATION: PEP MONTSERRAT

By
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Kathleen Cormier, a mother from suburban Minneapolis, is trying to instill a sense of gratitude in her sons, ages 12 and 17. But sometimes she wonders if other parents have given up.

Some of her sons' peers, she says, are lacking in the basics of gratitude, such as looking adults in the eye to thank them. The saddest part, she says, is that many parents don't even expect their children to be grateful anymore. They are accustomed to getting no acknowledgment for, say, devoting their weekend to driving from activity to activity. There is "such a lack of respect," she says.

Every generation seems to complain that children "these days" are so much more entitled and ungrateful than in years past. This time, they might be right. In today's selfie culture, which often rewards bragging and arrogance over kindness and humility, many people are noticing a drop-off in everyday expressions of gratitude.

In a 2012 national online poll of 2,000 adults, commissioned by the John Templeton Foundation, 59% of those surveyed thought that most people today are "less likely to have an attitude of gratitude than 10 or 20 years ago." The youngest group, 18- to 24-year-olds, were the least likely of any age group to report expressing gratitude regularly (only 35%) and the most likely to express gratitude for self-serving reasons ("it will encourage people to be kind or generous to me").

"In some communities, specifically among the white middle and upper-middle class, there's good reason to believe that kids are less grateful than in the past," says psychologist Richard Weissbourd, faculty director of the Making Caring Common initiative at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. He places much of the blame on the self-esteem movement.

As Dr. Weissbourd sees it, parents were fed a myth that if children feel better about themselves—if parents praise them, cater to their every need and make them feel happy—it will help them to develop character. "But what we're seeing in many cases is the opposite: When parents organize their lives around their kids, those kids expect everyone else to as well, and that leads to entitlement," he says. And when children are raised to feel entitled to everything, they are left feeling grateful for nothing.

'Gratitude can be cultivated at any age.'

A growing body of research points to the many psychological and social benefits of regularly counting your blessings. The good news for parents: It also suggests that it's never too late for their children to learn the subtle joys of appreciating the good in their lives. Gratitude can be cultivated at any age, whether it finds expression as a mood, a social emotion or a personality trait.

Researchers find that people with a grateful disposition are more thankful for a wider variety of things in their lives, such as their friends, their health, nature, their jobs or a higher power—and that they experience feelings of gratitude more intensely. For them, gratitude isn't a one-off "thank you." It's a mind-set, a way of seeing the world.

"Gratitude is also a spiritual emotion, whether it's implicitly or explicitly expressed," says David Rosmarin, director of the Spirituality and Mental Health Program at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. Almost every world religion includes gratitude as part of its value system, he says, citing familiar practices such as prayers of thanks or blessings over food.

In a study led by Dr. Rosmarin, published in 2011 in the Journal of Positive Psychology, researchers surveyed more than 400 adults online, assessing their religious and

general gratitude, their religious commitment, and their mental and physical well-being. The researchers found, in keeping with past studies, that general gratitude was associated with less anxiety, less depression and greater well-being. They also found that religious gratitude—toward God—was associated with additional reductions in anxiety and depression and increases in well-being.

Kristen Welch, with her husband, Terrell, and their three children. PHOTO: MICHAEL STARGHILL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

It can be difficult to remember to be grateful, for adults and children alike. Kristen Welch, a mother of three children between the ages of 11 and 18, lives outside of Houston and is the author of “Raising Grateful Kids in an Entitled World.” She admits that she was once “constantly comparing myself and my home to what others had.” If she visited a neighbor who was remodeling her kitchen, she would come back wanting to redo hers too, even though her kitchen didn’t need it. She noticed a similar attitude in her children. “Whenever I’d give them something, it was never enough. They always wanted more,” she says.

Most of the research on the benefits of gratitude has been focused on adults, but researchers are now turning their attention to how gratitude can better the lives of children, too. They're finding that the experience of high levels of gratitude in the adolescent years can set a child up to thrive.

Gratitude initiates what researchers call an "upward spiral of positive emotions." Adolescents who rate higher in gratitude tend to be happier and more engaged at school, as compared with their less grateful peers, and to give and receive more social support from family and friends. They also tend to experience fewer depressive symptoms and less anxiety, and they are less likely to exhibit antisocial behavior, such as aggression.

Counting your blessings may provide a built-in coping strategy, as research among adults suggests. Grateful people experience daily hassles and annoyances just like everyone else, but they tend to view setbacks through a different lens, reframing challenges in a positive light.

Dr. Weissbourd gives the example of one of his students, who comes from a low-income community in South America: "We were talking about gratitude, and he said that whenever he gets frustrated about waiting for the bus, he reminds himself that where he's from, most people have to walk," he says.

For a study published last year in the Journal of Positive Psychology, researchers tracked the role of gratitude in the lives of more than 500 adolescents from an affluent area of Long Island in New York over the course of four years, as they moved from middle school to high school. At four different points, students filled out questionnaires, rating on a scale of 1 to 7 how strongly they agreed with statements such as, "I have so much to be thankful for"; "If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list"; and "I am grateful to a wide variety of people."

'Being grateful might "undercut the motives for acting antisocially among adolescents."'

The researchers also measured antisocial and prosocial behaviors. They asked the students to rate how often (never, sometimes, often) they "stuck up for another kid who was in trouble," for example, or made "a kid upset because you were mean to them." The researchers looked as well at the students' satisfaction with different aspects of their lives (school, self, family friends), how much support they received from family and friends, and their levels of empathy and self-regulation.

The study found that a growth in gratitude over the four years not only predicted a growth in prosocial behavior, it also predicted a decrease in negative social behavior compared with students whose gratitude levels stayed level or decreased. Being grateful might "undercut the motives for acting antisocially among adolescents," the researchers suggest.

Students who were more grateful were also better at managing their lives and identifying important goals for the future, says lead researcher Giacomo Bono, assistant professor of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills. “When adolescents regularly express gratitude,” he adds, “it’s a good litmus test that they’re thriving.”

Grateful adolescents enjoy stronger relationships with their peers, in part perhaps because their positive disposition makes them more attractive and likable. In a 2015 study published in the journal Emotion, researchers conducted an experiment with 70 undergraduate students. They found that acquaintances were more likely to want to stay in touch with a student who expressed gratitude toward them (in writing) than students who didn’t show appreciation. Grateful students were perceived by peers as having a warmer personality and being more friendly and thoughtful.

Adolescents who rate higher in gratitude tend to give and receive more social support from family and friends. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

As parents, we do our best to teach our children to be grateful, by doing things such as nagging them to writing thank you notes. Experts warn, however, that our best efforts can backfire and actually become a barrier to genuinely experiencing gratitude. Children need to learn how to "think" gratefully, they say, not just to mindlessly go through the motions of giving thanks.

Ms. Cormier says that she has worked hard to make gratitude a family habit since her children were little—and now it has become the norm. She encourages finding gratitude in the "everyday stuff," she says, not just in response to birthday and Christmas presents. She also tries to teach gratitude by example. When her children help out around the house, like noticing when the trash is full and taking it out, or holding the door open, she thanks them. And now, she says, "my kids thank me every single time I put fresh sheets on their bed," chaperone a field trip or make them dinner.

In a paper published in 2014 in the journal School Psychology Review, researchers describe an educational program that they developed to train elementary-school students, ages 8 to 11, in gratitude. More than 200 students participated. Half were assigned to a control condition, while the other half were assigned to the gratitude intervention, which some received for one week and others for more than five. The program's lessons included, for example, reading "The Giving Tree" by Shel Silverstein and asking students to write down one thing they would do to show the generous tree in the story that they were grateful for what she had done.

Researchers found that students who received the training, even for just one week, were not only better at "thinking" gratefully, they also reported experiencing more grateful emotions and greater increases in positive social behavior (such as writing thank-you notes) and emotional well-being than students in the control group. When researchers followed up five months later with students who had stayed in the program longer, these positive effects had continued to grow. With intentional practice, experts say that gratitude can move from a fleeting state to a habit and can eventually become a personality trait.

Casey Rummel, an 11th-grade English teacher at Leadership Public Schools in Richmond, Calif., used the gratitude curriculum in his class as part of an upcoming study. It made such an impact that he's continuing to use it even though the study ended.

Using a computer program developed by their school, students spend the first four minutes of each class expressing gratitude to their classmates in writing. These notes have included such simple messages as: "thanks for always being there bro appreciate it much love" or, "Thanks for being a welcoming person...." Some of the notes Mr. Rummel has read, particularly between the boys, are things "they likely wouldn't feel comfortable saying out loud," he says.

The research points to several ways that parents can help children to think gratefully. Parents can spur their children to appreciate and reflect on the time and thought behind

the gifts and kindness they receive, as in: “Jack really knows how much you love football. How thoughtful that he gave you a jersey of your favorite team” or “Wow, Grandma just took a five-hour train ride to come and see you perform in that play.”

A turning point for the Welch family came when they started volunteering as a family to assist poverty-stricken communities, at home and overseas. Two years ago, her daughter went on a volunteer trip to help rebuild homes in rural Texas. One house had floors so rotted that you could see the ground. When her daughter came home, Ms. Welch says, she got down and hugged the floor and said, ‘I’ve never been grateful for a floor, but now I am.’”

Last year, Kathryn Virmani, mother of two from Westfield, N.J., helped to organize a fundraiser with an educational component at her children’s school to teach responsible citizenship and encourage gratitude. “A bad day for kids in our town is a parent not letting them use their Xbox,” she says. The students raised money for Heifer International, a nonprofit that aids struggling communities world-wide. When the kids heard some of the villages had no access to water or electricity, they asked “ ‘why don’t the people just go to the supermarket?’ The very thought that supermarkets don’t exist in some places was an eye-opener,” says Ms. Virmani.

For some parents, a good starting point is simply to set a better example themselves. In the Templeton poll, less than half of respondents said that they express thanks or gratitude daily to their spouse or partner.

It’s also important for children—and adults—to notice and acknowledge the larger circle of people who benefit their lives, like the school secretary or janitor, says Dr. Weissbourd. “In a society that has become so splintered and self-focused,” he says, “gratitude is a common bond and offers one of the best ways for us to connect with one another.”

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