

Raising a Thankful Child

With Thanksgiving barely in the rear-view mirror, many families are likely reeling from the day, relieved it's over. So many experience the day fraught with tension. Before the critical eyes of friends and relatives, many children likely caused their parents embarrassment and stress, provoking angry, judgmental looks, comments and reactions, which in turn prompted more embarrassing behavior. More children today seem to have a take-everything-for-granted attitude, and thankfulness is furthest from their minds. What happened to Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving dinners? How do we teach our children gratitude and thankfulness?

It begins with us. Modeling gratitude with friends and neighbors goes a long way in teaching our children, but modeling is most effective, for better or for worse, in our relationship with our own children. Many parents struggle to get their children to be respectful, to help out with chores, and to be kind to one another. But yelling and threatening to get them to do what they are told sets the opposite example. Children resist when they feel put down, misunderstood, and unaccepted.

Our children deserve the same respect from us that we expect from them. But why don't we give it? We somehow think they owe us. Perhaps because that is what was expected of us, and now it's our turn. In our frustration, we model anger, force, threats, and coercion to get what we want. That is what they learn. What if we used gratitude and thankfulness instead?

You wouldn't call a friend when you are in need of help and say, "Be here Saturday at 9:00 and don't be late." Appreciation, humility, and consideration of the friend's agenda would be in order as well as a returned favor. Children are just like anyone else. Try a little understanding and appreciation and see what happens. When you want your child to pick up his toys, clean her room, or take out the trash, don't simply demand it. Let them know *your* need for help (not *their* need to help you), be considerate of their agendas and schedule, make a plan, and show appreciation.

Where is your level of acceptance when it comes to others? How do your children hear you talk about minorities, the disabled, gays, poor, rich, different nationalities,

religions, skin color? Not talking about them makes them “not like us” in your children’s eyes. But experiencing you accepting and respecting everyone teaches strong messages of more than just tolerance.

Please and thank yous are important habits to establish from a young age. But those habits are necessary for all of us. Do you and your partner say please and thank you to each other? Do you say it to your child? Too many of us fall into the double standard trap of *do as I say, not as I do*. If that’s the case, don’t expect your children to be grateful and respectful of you.

At the dinner table, try the gratitude game. Each night go around the table and have each member of the family tell something about their day that they are grateful for. Always allow a pass. Never coerce gratitude!

Teach children early on the value of expressing gratitude and writing thank you notes for gifts. If they can’t write, have them dictate what they would like to say. In the early years, write thank you notes together to make it less of a chore. When receiving gifts, think about what you encourage your child to say. Are you sending the message that lying is okay as long as Aunt Harriet feels good? When children don’t like a gift, there are many ways to accept without being either false or impolite. “Thanks, Aunt Harriet, I really appreciate this” does just fine without requiring fake enthusiasm and insincerity. If Aunt Harriet is not present, discuss how your child feels about the gift, allow disappointment and venting, and then ask your child what can be said that will neither hurt feelings nor lie but be appreciative of her effort. Watch that you do not value false enthusiasm over honesty. What have you then taught your child about deception when he doesn’t want to disappoint you about his underage drinking at a party he wants to attend?

Also, be wary of treating your children with *too much* praise and appreciation. When children believe they are special, they see themselves above the rest, above the rules that apply to others—entitled. David Brooks, New York Times columnist, described the old fashioned value of humility in a recent article as “...the sense that nobody is that different from anybody else....” Critical to respecting both oneself and others is living in the knowledge that no one’s rights and needs are any more or any less important

than anyone else's. Hence, *do unto others, as you would have them do unto you*. We lost gratitude and thankfulness as important values when we began the climb for personal best. Rewards have gotten bigger and praise is lavished for normally expected behavior in our misguided efforts to insure our children's competitive edge.

In the wake of horrific too-close-to-home crimes perpetrated by teenagers, we wonder where their values were when they so devalued human life. We need to raise our children in the knowledge that we are all in this together, that we help one another, that others are just as important as we are and that everyone deserves respect and kindness. And it is because of that, we give thanks for what we have.