

Ask an Expert: Nine Tips for Fostering Gratitude – During the Holidays and Beyond

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What did you get for Christmas? This question is common for young and old alike. While it may be a way of showing genuine interest and sharing in the holiday excitement, it's important to make sure gratitude for gifts and kindness is part of Christmas day and beyond.

Gratitude is a character trait based on a genuine sense of caring. It usually goes beyond a simple thank you, although that can be a good place to start. Genuine thankfulness requires thought and action in order to be mutually beneficial to the giver and receiver.

Gail Innis from Michigan State University Extension, states that real gratitude or a sense of thankfulness begins when we are able to recognize and point out small things that make us thankful. Adults can model the behavior through daily words and actions, starting early with young children. For example: "Dad works so hard for our family. Why don't we make him a special meal to show him how much we appreciate him?"

Innis provides additional ways to develop an attitude of gratitude by citing references from [The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation](#).

1. Discuss a gift your child received during the holidays. Ask what the child liked about it. Talk about the gift giver and how nice it is to be remembered and appreciated by someone.

2. Have your child draw a picture or write a note of thanks. Share how good it feels to get a note or letter in the mail. Assist your child, depending on age and developmental stage, in addressing and mailing the note. Putting feelings on paper can make them more real for a child.

3. Make a thank you phone or video call to the gift giver. Encourage your child to talk about the gift and share how he or she will use it.

4. Involve your children in local charitable events. Stay informed about community endeavors that help those less fortunate. Discuss upcoming events and brainstorm ways your family could assist. Include your children in a discussion about the charity you'd like to support and why. Even a very young child can assist in choosing a toy for a holiday toy drive.

5. Read stories about generous people and characters. The book, "The Giving Tree," by Shel Silverstein, might be a way to open a conversation about the attitude of gratitude. In "Have You Filled a Bucket Today?" author Carol McCloud tells of an easy way to teach children the power of affirming words and actions.

6. Take advantage of winter days by helping your children clean out old toys, books and clothing they no longer use. Talk about how much other children will appreciate these items. Some local thrift stores, pantries or organizations will even deliver donations. Be certain to check ahead for rules on what the group will take for distribution.

7. Have a Saturday family baking day and prepare packages of homemade items. These can be shared with elderly neighbors or a service provider such as the mail carrier, a bus driver or teacher.

8. Pay attention to people who display generosity and kindness. Point them out to your child. For example, "Wasn't it nice of daddy to help grandma with her heavy winter coat?" Or, "Did you see that man pick up the litter someone dropped in the park?" Say thank you out loud when someone opens a door for you, lets you cut in front of them in the check-out line or does any other kind act.

9. Take time each day at dinner or bedtime to mention one thing you are thankful for. (See: http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/teaching_an_attitude_of_gratitude_to_young_children)

Creating a feeling of gratitude that lasts beyond Christmas morning takes effort but is well worth it. Repetition and guidance from parents and loving adults are important keys to instilling gratitude in children.

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