

The Attitude of Gratitude 11-23-06

Nothing warms a parent's heart like this word from a child: "Thanks!" It is a parent's great pleasure to care for a child, providing the very best we can offer. But it is important for a children's development to learn to be grateful for what they have.

This is especially true in a society in which all of us seem to feel entitled to the abundance we regularly enjoy. We have become so accustomed to good things that we begin to feel that we somehow deserve them all.

Gratitude breeds happiness just as feeling entitled breeds discontent. An attitude of gratitude gives children more perspective about the world as well as their own opportunities in it.

Parents teach gratitude by both example and direct instruction. Parents' expressions of gratitude heightens children's awareness of their family's good fortune. One family I know prepares for bed with a recitation of all the wonderful things that happened in their day, both small (the lady at the check out stand gave us a balloon!) and significant (Grandpa came today!)

Contrast this attitude with the one that says "Our 30-foot boat isn't nearly as good as our neighbor's 40-foot boat" (perhaps spoken by the same parent who complains that his children don't appreciate their toys).

Parents grow weary with children's whining and complaining, but sometimes children are mimicking an attitude they learned at home. When parents convey the attitude that "we never seem to get a break," their children are not learning about gratitude. Focusing on all that is wrong and failing to notice all that is right teaches children to be short-sighted.

Two conscientious parents shared with me how they have taught gratitude to their children. Anne and Mark taught them to "write" thank you notes even before they could write. They would color a picture and slip it into an envelope for mom to mail.

These same wise parents now have a policy about gifts in their home: Thank you notes must be written before gifts can be played with, worn, spent or otherwise used.

Last year Anne and Mark's family experienced a dreadful house fire. They were out of their home for many months while it was essentially rebuilt. Their losses were overwhelming.

But when you ask them about the fire, they talk about the amazing kindnesses extended to them. Their grateful attitude armed them to successfully face the ravages of this particular tragedy. Their children have experienced gratitude training both by direct teaching and example.

Learning appreciation may take some time, but, fortunately, there is no statute of limitations on gratitude. Age and maturity can be great teachers of thankfulness. My 26-year-old daughter recently made my day when she thanked me for a small kindness I had done for her—when she was twelve.