



grateful living

By Rose Stanley *

Encouraging our children to be grateful and thankful, from an early age, can lead them to have great, *full* lives. But they have to learn by example. Here are some ways you can foster this in your family.

We all have our catch-phrases, I'm guilty of it myself. My children would probably tell you that mine is "Just be mindful of..." Mindfulness has become a bit of a buzzword lately, with the principle of mindfulness being an awareness of your environment and your feelings, and actively attempting to get rid of the distractedness and clutter in your brain. How curious that at a point when many of us are concerned about the mindlessness which often pervades our technology-saturated world (i.e. vegetating in front of the television, iPad, etc), we are beginning to think about being more present in our lives, both physically and mentally.

Being more mindful can lead us to thinking about things we have to be grateful for. As we all know, it's not until we give ourselves the time to stop and think that we realise there are good things happening in our busy lives. We bandy about the term 'glass half-full or half-empty' all the time, labelling children and adults alike with this supposedly inherent tendency. But, do we model optimism in a way that children can relate to and copy? Do we have an expectation that kids will understand what gratefulness even means or looks like? What if as parents we could put into place some very simple practises to help our family see more of the good things in life?

Just for the record, I'm not referring to bringing up little people who spout happiness platitudes when others are facing difficult and challenging circumstances. I am meaning the ability to see something good, if ever so small, coming out of adverse situations, of having a good-humoured response in challenging moments, of being able to spot the hidden glass of lemonade in a pile of lemons.

So how do we give this a go? Firstly, you can breathe a sigh of relief at this point because you don't have to be over the top about it, you don't need to go on a course to learn how to do it, and you don't need any special resources or equipment. Just a willingness to try and keep trying. This is something you can do in your own unique way, because the very nature of being grateful is that it needs to be genuine. There's little point in just telling your kids to be grateful, it must be modelled, just like every other parenting technique.

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If we try, we can all think of things we can be thankful for – it's just a case of verbalising these on a regular basis. Begin very simply, for example, "I am so glad we can have a rest now, because I am tired!" or "I am enjoying the sunshine today, I will get my washing dry!" ... you get the idea. At the dinner table, a good conversation starter can be "What could you say thanks for today?". Or try a simple conversational game with younger children which involves taking turns, with the adult starting with "Cheers for ..." and the children chime in with "great food, my toys, my Dad" etc. See how many things they can come up with. Once children are older, you can encourage them to continue the statement, for instance, "I am so happy granddad is coming over today, because he always cheers me up and does stupid things to make me laugh!".

It is the attitude rather than the wording that is the key; expressing our appreciation for people and things in our lives can be a vital tool to help us through the hard times.

Gratefulness can also develop your kids' ability to come up with creative and different ways of being appreciative, so that when, for instance, they have to write in Dad's card for Father's day, it will be easier to articulate what they love about him. (It is not uncommon for the mind to go completely blank when it is forced to come up with great comments about someone we care about!)

If mindfulness can lead to gratefulness, then gratefulness just might lead to kids having a better chance of having great, full lives and becoming contented adults. When broken down to its essence, by practising gratefulness, even if we can turn the tables slightly, encouraging our kids to be a little more grateful than before, then we're champions. Not only that, if we hone this skill in our own lives, we will be able to deal with every day tensions and dramas in a more gracious and relational way.

tips for parents and caregivers

Regularly use the terms 'grateful' and 'thankful' so that from early on, children understand the concept. Pick up on it when you see your children being appreciative.

Make a 'Things that make us smile' chart on the wall/fridge or use a journal for older kids, or draw pictures with younger children. Children can think of the good stuff in their lives, people and things that they appreciate.

Encourage dinnertime conversations around questions like "Who is the friend you most appreciate right now?", "Who helped you in some way today?"

Use the 'Oh well ...' principle for small children. "It's raining outside. Oh well, we can have some fun indoors today!"

Rainy day activity: choose a friend or family member and make a card or poster including all the things they do for you that you are grateful for.

When children come home from school and have had a bad day, a great exercise after they have had their opportunity to tell you all about it, if they are able, is to ask them if there are any positives they can take from the experience.

Stop and imagine: have a spontaneous chat to your child about simple things we take for granted. For example, "Imagine how long it took for the dishes to be done before dishwashers were invented! I'm really glad we have one!"

** Rose has worked in schools for the past 8 years caring for children, firstly as a Student Support worker and most recently as a tutor through the Lifewalk Trust. She has three books to be published early in 2014, to aid children with emotional literacy.*

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