

Raising a Thankful Child

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As we enter this season of Thanksgiving, we may find ourselves reflecting more often on how to raise a thankful child. At first glance, parents might think about how to teach the social scripts of thank you. Should a 2-year-old be forced to say thank you to Grandma for a gift? Should a 4-year-old sign a thank you note for a birthday present? Should a 6-year-old show appreciation for a large helping of spinach and cranberry sauce on his or her Thanksgiving plate?

Parents often have the best intentions of raising a thankful child as part of their parental job descriptions. We tend to use the social graces of please and thank you as one index of raising a “good kid.” Indeed, manners such as these are important tools for getting along and working together with others in our society.

Even young children can be taught to say please and thank you. Giving them prompts (“What do you say?”), withholding the requested item (“You can’t have the cookie unless I hear the magic words”), and modeling (“Could you please pass the juice?”) are ways to encourage learning these manners. But is learning to say thank you the same as being thankful?

Think about something in the past year for which you are thankful. Is it a person, place, or thing? an event? a state of being? Did you say thank you? How did you express your gratitude? Did it feel sincere or more like satisfying a social grace?

The development of morality is marked in part by the emergence of the moral emotions such as shame, pride, guilt, embarrassment, and empathy. As these emotions develop, they allow children to feel a response in relationship to their own actions toward others. The emotional feedback contributes to that sense of sincerity.

Our gut reactions may highlight a comparison of manners vs. morals. While both reflect an aspect of how we treat others, children can use manners just by learning a script. The problem in learning scripts for manners for a child too young or separated from meaning is that children satisfy the social grace without experiencing the emotional response or acting upon their own intent. For example, 4-year-old Beth runs to greet her grandmother. “Thanks, Grandma!” she says, grabbing the present out of her grandmother’s hand. She opens the box to find six pairs of white socks. Crestfallen, she says, “Thank you, Grandma, for my socks.” Beth’s first thanks is genuine appreciation for receiving a present, but her second thank you is the script that she is supposed to say.

Teaching manners is a fine art of modeling but not always the making of meaning. Raising thankful children is a fine art of helping them make their own meaning. Maybe it is a crumpled, crayon-scribbled card. Maybe it is a fresh bouquet of dandelions (and a few other weeds) from the back yard or local park. Maybe it is just a warm hug after a cold ice cream treat.

Children express some sense of thankfulness and desire to be appreciated all the time. It is our role as parents to model appreciation and reflect those genuine feelings back to the child. With a warm smile and a sincere voice, we can say, “Thank you for my beautiful card. I can tell you worked hard on it. You used so many different colors! It makes me feel really good and happy inside. I’m going to put it up right here on the refrigerator so our whole family can enjoy it.”

Thankfulness also emerges from children raised with the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Like adults, children need to be exposed to genuine appreciation and to feel appreciated.

Many years ago on our family vacation, my 8-year-old daughter saved some of her carnival money and schemed a way to buy me a small candle and matching stand. The gift brought tears to my eyes, and we both knew our appreciation was genuine. And yes, I said thank you.

Audience: *Family*

Age: *Early Primary, Infant/Toddler, Kindergarten, Preschool*

Topics: *Child Development, Social and Emotional Development, Relationships*

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