

REAL LIFE SOLUTIONS

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Giving Thanks: Can Gratitude Make Us Nicer?

Somewhere between the cornbread stuffing and pumpkin pie, there's a good chance that you express gratitude at Thanksgiving. The very name of this holiday seems to beckon us—for at least a moment—to give thanks for something. Frequently, though, this act often involves a brief counting of blessings before moving on to dessert.

But expressing gratitude should be more than just a familiar (and fleeting) Thanksgiving ritual. According to researchers at the University of Kentucky, it's an important way to promote mental health, well-being, and even kindness.

In a series of studies involving over 900 college students, researchers found that gratitude motivates people to express sensitivity and concern for others. It also promotes pro-social behavior. What's more, the act of giving thanks reduces feelings of anger and even lowers the incidence of aggressive behavior.

The findings, reported in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, suggest that the more we count

our blessings, the more likely we'll be to empathize with others. And the more empathic we are, the less aggressive we'll be.

In a nutshell, expressing gratitude is good for us. It's also good for others. And it's something worth doing the other 364 days of the year.

Are grateful people born or made?

According to experts, gratitude is an equal opportunity behavior. It is a skill that can be learned. And the earlier we flex our gratitude muscles, the better.

How can you promote grateful hearts in your home?

- **Start with you.** You are your children's first and most influential teacher. Find opportunities to express thanks out loud—to your partner, friends, extended family members, and children. View yourself as a gratitude role model.
- **Start early.** It's never too early to start encouraging gratitude. Even though young children's "feeling thankful" skills are still developing, you can introduce the words and actions associated with giving thanks. For example, while your young child is playing with his older sister, you might say, "You seem happy and thankful to be playing ball with Emily!"

- **Start small.** Giving thanks doesn't have to be a grand event. It can be demonstrated in many small ways throughout the year. At the dinner table, for example, you might take a moment to let your children know how grateful you feel to be their parent, and how thankful you are to enjoy the food on your plate. Over time, you might want to get more ambitious! For example, you can create a family gratitude journal—a weekly diary documenting the things for which you and your children feel grateful. Place it in an easily accessible place in the home so family members can read it or add to it throughout the week. You might also enjoy putting an "I'm thankful for..." sticky note on your children's mirrors in the morning. You can fill in the blank and write something you're thankful for about your kids. Or you might encourage your kids to fill in the blank and write something they're feeling grateful for. Either way, you'll increase the act of counting blessings in your home.

By Debbie Glasser, Ph.D., Psychology Today: Parenting News You Can Use.

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