Raising a Thankful Child

Being appreciative and thankful for what one has and for what others do for us—values we venture to guess most parents want their children to develop as they grow. But during those visits to the toy store, when your child is begging (or maybe even demanding or screaming) for the latest and greatest gadget she must have—you may wonder how (and when) children develop gratitude.

The fact is, it may take a few years yet for you to receive the thank you that you really deserve: Thank you for cupping your hand under my chin when I threw up my ravioli. Thank you for putting diaper ointment on me while I had that stomach thing. Thank you for cutting the scratchy labels out before I put on my shirt. Thank you for letting me watch the ants march by on the sidewalk for as long as I wanted. Thank you for always having tissues in your bag. Thank you for asking if the restaurant has crayons. Thanks for kissing my forehead when I have a bad dream. You’re the best!

So while children may not show outward appreciation or thankfulness much before age 3, like other values you want to instill in your child, you can start nurturing the idea of gratitude even in your child’s first year.

Ways to Raise a Thankful Child

**Keep gifts reasonable.** As tempting as it is to shower—or allow others to shower—your child with gifts, there are two important reasons not to. First, as children grow, it can be challenging to teach gratitude if they receive everything they ask for.

Secondly, a lot of gifts are overwhelming for small children. They can’t focus on or appreciate any one gift if they get so many. Often, they don’t even make it through opening all of them before they lose interest! Instead, you might suggest that family members choose 1 or 2 gifts for children. Explain that the fewer gifts, the more children will play with and appreciate them. If you are planning a large birthday party, consider asking close family members to bring gifts to a smaller event before the big one starts. For the big party, you might ask attendees to provide book donations for a local literacy programs or toys for disadvantaged children. This can be a good way to communicate the importance of giving and gratefulness.

**Look for ways to be involved in community giving with your toddler.** Between ages 2 and 3, you can begin to talk with your toddler about how he can help others who don’t have as much as he does. Look for opportunities with a clear connection between your child’s efforts and the recipients. Good choices include:

- Helping dogs/cats at your local shelter: We are playing with these dogs and cats who need lots of love and attention.
- Collecting canned foods for a local food pantry: We are helping people who need more food. They will eat the food we bring. Our food will help them feel strong and healthy.
Collecting jackets, hats and mittens for a local children’s program: The jackets we bring will help other children, just like you, stay warm during the winter.

Show thankfulness to your children. It’s easy to forget, but important to do. Thank you for cooperating at the doctor’s office. Thank you for getting your jacket when I asked. Thank you for coming right away when I said it was time to leave the park; I know it was hard for you to get off the swing. Thank you for your hug—it made me feel so happy!

Prompt children to use thankful words. Thankfulness is a complex idea. It will be a while yet before your child truly “gets” it. But reminding children to say “please” and “thank you” (beginning at about 18 months) is a good start. Because it will take some time for them to learn when to use these words, you’ll probably be providing prompts for a while.

Read books about what it means to be thankful. Books help children make sense of new ideas. Keep in mind that your child’s understanding of a book at 14 months will be different than what she gets out of it at 35 months—another good reason to share these stories over time. As she grows, talk with her about the stories and pictures and explore what it means to be “thankful.” Some age-appropriate choices for children aged 12 to 36-month-old include:

- Biscuit Is Thankful by Alyssa Satin Capucilli and Pat Schories
- Little Critter: Just So Thankful by Mercer Mayer
- Feeling Thankful by Shelly Rotner
- Thanksgiving Is for Giving Thanks by Margaret Sutherland
- I’m Thankful Each Day by P.K. Hallinan
- Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message by Jake Swamp
- All the Places to Love by Patricia MacLachlan

Involve children in writing thank-you notes. While you can’t sit your young child down with a pen and a stack of cards, you can involve her in showing thanks in age-appropriate ways. Snap a photo of your baby or toddler playing with a new toy or wearing a new outfit and include it with your thank you note. Ask your toddler to draw a picture for the gift-giver and, again, include with your note. You can ask your toddler: Grampy got you a new truck. Do you like it? What do you like about it the best? Copy down your child’s words in the note you write. Toddlers can also be involved in sticking a stamp on the envelope and putting the note in the mailbox. Starting early makes this important tradition of gratitude an everyday part of children’s lives.
Start traditions for showing thanks. These traditions give children a lifetime memory of gratefulness and giving in the context of family. Some ideas:

- Make a “what I am thankful for” tree. Use a paper towel tube for the trunk. Cut leaf shapes out of construction paper and write on each leaf something your child says he is thankful for. Glue the paper leaves onto the tube/trunk. Ideally, every family member who is old enough to participate should make a tree each year.

- Begin dinnertime once a week with every family member saying something they are grateful for.

- Instead of a birthday gifts, write your child an “appreciation letter” describing all the different ways your child has grown and changed that year, and all the things you love and appreciate about him. These letters, beginning in each child’s first year, can be kept in a special binder in children’s rooms.

Think about what it means to be thankful in your family and culture. Share stories about gratefulness that are drawn from your family history, community and culture. For example, one family tells their son a story about his grandmother who, during the Great Depression, once received only an orange for Christmas but “it was the sweetest orange she ever had and she was grateful.” Each year, along with his other gifts, the son receives an orange as well.

His mother remembers, When our son was 3 and heard this story, he just focused on how his grandmother didn’t get any toys. When he was 7, he said he felt sad for his Grandma just getting the orange and wanted to get her something ‘really good’ that year for Christmas. By the time he was 11, he really got the point of the story. When we handed him his Christmas orange, he told us, ‘You know, I think mine is the sweetest I ever had, too.’ The story really became a way for him to connect with our past as a family.

Source: Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families