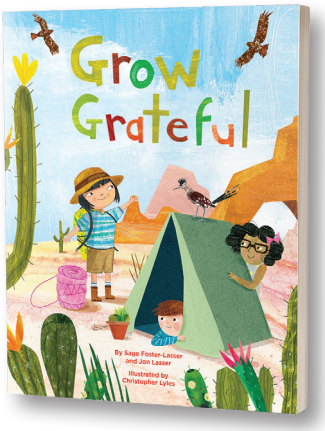
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Why Gratitude is Great for Kids, Backed by Science

by Jon Lasser, PhD



Teaching children about gratitude has become increasingly popular as families and schools have recognized the importance of social-emotional learning. We want children to develop the capacity to take the perspective of others, appreciate acts of kindness, and experience feelings of gratitude. Recent psychological research on gratitude confirms what parents and caregivers have long known: feeling grateful is good for us.

A review of the scientific literature on gratitude[1] compiled dozens of studies that link our gratitude to wellness. For example, researchers have found that gratitude is associated with:

- physical health
- stronger relationships
- greater likelihood of forgiving
- better sleep
- decreased stress

In many cases, we're not sure if feeling grateful causes these outcomes or if the outcomes cause gratitude (perhaps those who have stronger relationships become more grateful). It's also possible that these factors don't have a direct, causal relationship, but rather they're just correlated or associated. Even so, we know that those who are grateful are more likely to experience these positive outcomes.

Feeling grateful is good for us

Some researchers have been able to demonstrate in experimental conditions that thinking about that for which we are grateful makes us feel better. For example, simply making lists of things for which we are grateful can make us feel better, and those good feelings can persist for months. Gratitude lists take only a few minutes, but can have a powerful, positive impact on our affect.

Unfortunately, most of the research on gratitude has been conducted with adults, so we're still learning how young children learn about and experience gratitude. It's possible that young children have been overlooked by researchers because of assumptions regarding a child's ability to think about others' feelings. While the capacity to take someone's perspective is still developing in early childhood, we know that children can read the facial expressions of others and that feelings of gratitude are emerging. This is an exciting developmental period in which families and schools can play an active role in helping children learn about gratitude.

Picture books are a great starting point, as children use stories to identify with characters and make sense of the world. *Grow Grateful* tells the story of a girl who goes on a camping trip with her teacher and classmates and learns about gratitude. Following the story is a section for adults that includes information about gratitude and activities for young children to engage them in hands-on experiences about feeling grateful.

Here's one of the suggested activities from the back of *Grow Grateful*:

Create grateful art

Get out some art materials and work with your child to make something creative around the theme of gratitude. For example, cut out pictures from old magazines that represent things for which you are grateful and then glue them to poster board. Hang up your gratitude collage as a reminder of the things for which you're thankful. When doing this, let your child select his or her own pictures, as gratitude is individualized and personal.

Since research on gratitude shows it's linked to many positive outcomes for health and psychological wellness, it seems that families and teachers would want to play an important role in helping children develop greater awareness and appreciation of others' feelings. Fortunately, there are strategies that can be incorporated into the daily activities of young children. Adults can help children grow grateful by engaging in puppet play while talking about what each puppet likes about the other puppets. When reading books, adults can ask children about the character's feelings. For example, "if you were the lion in the story, what would make you feel grateful?" These playful approaches may cultivate not only authentic feelings of gratitude, but also a more general, positive approach to the world.

[1] Wood, A.M., Froh, J.J., & Geraghty, A.W.A. (2010). Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review,* 7, 890-905.