

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Gratitude for Moments of Shared Joy

THIS IS THE SEASON to turn our minds to gratitude.

One of the times I'm most grateful for this year occurred on October 30 in Oakland at the Cathedral of Light, when some Meher School students and alumni, members of the White Horse Youth Chorale, performed with YouTube sensation Friar Alessandro Brustenghi for 1,440 children and their teachers, and chaperones from San Francisco and Oakland. The singers actually learned songs in Italian in order to accompany the tenor, who traveled to America for the first time on this trip. This photo of the girls and the friar captures the joy of the event, and looking at it makes me feel deeply grateful for all the effort of the singers, and more people than I can count, that culminated in such an unforgettable day.

In America we celebrate Thanksgiving to remember a transformative collaboration: the day the first settlers gathered in thankfulness with Native Americans for a successful year fulfilling their dream of living in the New World. Historians say the Pilgrims wouldn't have survived the first year without the help of the indigenous people who showed them how to plant crops appropriate to American soil.

Thanksgiving seems an opportune time to give thanks for people who have helped us, cooperated with us, and played a part in making our lives flourish. I like the practice of expressing gratitude for the people in my life rather than the things I have. My husband and I have a tradition of taking a photo of everyone who comes to Thanksgiving each year.

When I look at a Thanksgiving photo from two years ago, I see "Mr. Frank" Schoolmaster, who passed away this year. He contributed so much to our preschool and to my teaching. There was rarely a day that I didn't bring a child's question to him about a bug or a butterfly. I often meet parents whose children have gone on to high school and college who still feel grateful for all they learned about science from Mr. Frank. Looking at Thanksgiving photos has become an important way for me to remember people who have meant so much to me.

Looking at pictures at Thanksgiving time offers an intentional way to remind ourselves of all others have done for us. Mary Jane Ryan, author of the bestselling *Attitudes of Gratitude* and a former parent at our school, emphasizes that we need to teach children to feel and express gratitude starting when children are young. She says, "Gratitude is a learned trait, not something



Friar Alessandro with members of the White Horse Youth Chorale, following the October 30 concert.

we are born with.” Looking at photos gives us the opportunity to say “Remember when Grandma took you to see a play? That was such a fun day.” Make Thanksgiving albums to look back on in future years.

Make a list of people who help. Brainstorming about all the people who play helpful roles in your family’s life heightens children’s awareness of the importance of interconnectedness. It also helps to broaden a child’s perspective of what “helpfulness” is. Talk about parents who drive in the carpool, neighbors who bring banana bread, store clerks who spread good cheer.

Look on line for gratitude projects. Pinterest has wonderful visuals of Thanksgiving projects for children, many of them expressing gratitude.

Write thank-you notes. Thanksgiving can be a nice time to review the year in terms of gratitude. Encourage your child to write notes or draw pictures of appreciation for people in our lives. “Remember the day the office receptionist comforted you when you felt sick?” “Let’s write to thank Angela’s mother for taking you on so many fun adventures.”

Thank your children. Talk to your children about the times they’ve shown appreciation in the family and to others in their lives. Whatever we pay attention to grows, and gratitude is definitely a quality we want to nourish.

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