

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Building Our “Gratefulness Muscles”

TEACHING CHILDREN TO SAY THANK YOU isn't the same as helping them to actually feel gratitude, a capacity that is often highlighted in this season. The ability to experience thankfulness for things, little and big, is a learned behavior, not innate, and we are our child's primary teachers. If we want our children to feel appreciative, we have to live that ourselves.

That's challenging because our human circuitry sets us up to live in a state of feeling slightly deprived. We're wired to scan for excitement and acquisition, not appreciation. Our brains acclimating to all that's right in our lives can automatically cause us to take the good things for granted.

Teaching our children to feel grateful involves waking ourselves up to our good fortune, not just what we have, but who we have and the kindness and generosity and beauty that surrounds us.

Misfortunes big and small enliven our abilities to cherish the little things. Illness activates our awareness that we have had and can work toward having good health. A car accident illumines our consciousness that we are still safe.

Hard things can provide opportunities to notice all that we have to appreciate. It's easy to talk about saying thank you for a gift, but speaking about difficulties often allows us to notice and actually experience gratitude. “We're stuck in traffic but we're lucky that we have snacks and we can sing some songs together in the car.” “Grandma is sick, but her doctors and nurses are all so kind and helpful to her.”

Like an athletic skill, learning to notice little things and feel grateful is an ability that takes constant practice. Taking a time each day as a family to reflect on what we appreciate builds our “gratefulness muscles” and habits that program for happiness.

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