

Positive Parenting  
November 2007  
Marilyn Sharpe

## GRATITUDE

Thanksgiving is coming and gratitude is in the air. Hymns and prayers in worship give thanks for all God's bounty. Cards arrive, echoing thanks for this season, this opportunity to be mindful and thankful. Even fund raisers thank you in advance for your gift. As families and friends gather around a festive meal, many express their thankfulness for the turkey, for family and friends, for health, for good work to do, for the freedoms we enjoy.

Meanwhile, with our children, we often bemoan the lack of gratitude and are concerned about the sense of entitlement among children ... of all ages. As parents, we rarely hear a "thank you" for a ride given, a party thrown, a friend invited to dinner, much less the daily gifts of working to support the family, cooking the food, washing clothes, helping with homework, putting bandaids on a skinned knee or a broken heart.

How can we raise grateful children? I believe that there are four primary ways:

**MODEL IT** The most important lessons happen as we model the quality, trait, or behavior we want our children to learn. If there is dissonance between what we say and what we do, our children will believe and emulate what we do. If you want grateful kids, be a grateful adult.

Let them see and hear you saying "thank you" to those who wait on you in the shoe store and bakery, those who carry out your groceries and change the oil in your car. Yes, you are paying for those services, but money never replaces gratitude. That is a human being who is serving you, not a machine. All need the dignity and respect of a "thank you." Your children are watching and listening.

If you co-parent, when the child's other parent does something that contributes to life together, say "thank you." When your child does something helpful, cooperative, or kind, say "thank you."

**TEACH IT** None of our children is born knowing how to share, how to pitch in and help, or what we mean when we say, "Be nice." We need to model it, but we also need to say in words what we expect or what we would like. Gratitude is no different. Do a dress rehearsal before a child's birthday party or Christmas. Help them practice saying "thank you" when anyone does something kind or helpful.

But please don't embarrass them with the patronizing reminder in front of the gift or cookie giver. "Now what do we say, Jamie?" (Oh, I cringe, thinking how many times I did this to my children, often beating them to the words they would have said, if only I'd kept my mouth shut a moment longer.)

**CATCH IT** When your child says “thank you” and expresses gratitude, make sure that you point that out to them. Describe exactly what they said or did that you appreciate.

In parenting, one of my favorite lines is “what gets attention, gets repeated.” It is true, whether or not the behavior is positive or negative and whether the attention is positive or negative. Since the goal of virtually all behavior is to get attention, it is vitally important that we give positive attention for positive behavior, so that it will be repeated. (It is also important to note that negative behavior that elicits negative attention will cause that behavior to be repeated. We are smart and caring parents, so we can learn to focus on the positive ... for all our sakes!)

**PRAY IT** Daily, at the table, at the bedside, thank God for all of God’s gifts to us. This season, let us remember with gratitude the giver of all good gifts.

### FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Say “thank you” for the little things of daily life – holding the door, setting the table, sharing a toy, pitching in to clean up the family room.
2. On a family member’s birthday, go around the table and name the gifts of this person and thank God for them.
3. Let children overhear you being grateful.
4. Make a list of things for which you are grateful and review them during family devotions, while sharing your day, or when tucking a child into bed.