

P^{bc} Parent

spring issue 2013
www.bcparent.ca

NEWSMAGAZINE



**Raising
Grateful
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Raising Kind and Grateful Children

On average, grateful kids are more optimistic, resilient and forgiving with fewer behaviour problems—but can we deliberately foster this positive attitude?

By Bev Yaworski

Twelve-year old Doug was definitely not thrilled or grateful when he received clothes for some of his Christmas presents. Upset, he ran to his room, closed the door and pouted for hours—putting a damper on the family’s holiday festivities.

In an online parenting chatroom, a mother writes: “I’m concerned about my young daughter’s selfish attitude. She recently had a birthday, and as soon as she was finished unwrapping her gifts, she started looking around for more!” Another parent says: “we surprised our son with basketball tickets when he got home from school today, but all he could do was complain about the 30 minute car ride to get there.”

And what parent hasn’t been badgered by their child’s repetitive demands for an expensive toy, the latest i-Phone or designer running shoes. Do these family situations sound familiar? Can you hear yourself saying: “my kids don’t appreciate what we do for them. If they would just say thank you and mean it.” Well, you are not alone, as a group of parents discovered at a Vancouver parenting program presented by Dr. Carla Fry, a child & youth psychologist. Speaking

on the topic of *“How To Raise A Kind and Grateful Child In An Era of Entitlement,”* Dr. Fry offered valuable insights into how to foster gratitude in a family.

Dr. Fry is conducting research with parents into the topic of gratitude and entitlement for an upcoming book. Her research shows that as parents and caregivers, we

My daughter recently had a birthday, and as soon as she finished unwrapping her gifts, she started looking around for more!

may unknowingly be coaching and shaping our children’s behaviour and encouraging them to be ungrateful or to feel entitled. There are also many outside influences that can cause a child’s ungratefulness, including movies, tv, peers, music, teachers and family. Fortunately, there are also practical tips that can be used to counter some of these psychological forces.

Gratitude and Entitlement

Dr. Fry emphasizes that a good starting point when approaching this topic is to ask yourself: “What do you want for your child? Is it happiness, success, freedom, power, kindness or other qualities?” Clarifying these qualities with your child will help guide what *you can do* to encourage the development of gratefulness in your kids and nurture their ability to feel compassion and empathy for you and for others.

It’s important to get a clear definition of the concepts of gratitude and entitlement. According to *Psychology Today*, gratitude is an emotion expressing appreciation for what one has. It’s more than just saying the words “thank you.” It’s about actually feeling thankful. In contrast, entitlement refers to a notion or belief that one (or oneself) is “deserving” of some particular reward or benefit without earning it.

Why is it important that children learn to feel grateful and kind? Research shows that grateful kids experience greater happiness and life satisfaction. They are more optimistic, resilient and forgiving. They are less depressed and have fewer behaviour problems. Entitled kids, in contrast, are more demanding, whiny and have more life problems.

Misguided Efforts

“We know that parents have really been trying,” says Dr. Fry, “But some of the entitlement issues are coming from misguided efforts, when parents thought they were making a good call. Most of the challenges come from parents really caring and thinking and reading and feeling like they were doing the right things.”

Some of the misguided efforts include:

- Needs always met: Meeting kids needs even before they know they have them.
- Overdoing praise: that is, giving praise out of proportion to the child’s effort or results.





- **Modeling:** what parents might be doing or saying that kids then observe and imitate. Some examples—implying that what the family has is not good enough, the grass is greener elsewhere, envying other’s situations.
- **Empathy:** teaching your kids that they should be given first priority in community situations—for example, insisting they have the lead in a school play or pushing for them to be on the first line of a hockey team.
- **Teaching children social skills** so that they will be liked rather than teaching social skills to care for others.

How To Foster Kindness and Gratitude

Dr. Fry and her associate psychologist Dr. Lisa Ferrari have developed some helpful suggestions for parents to use to promote gratefulness in kids and nurture a child’s ability to feel compassion and empathy for you and for others. These guidelines can be applied in an age appropriate manner.

- **Resist the temptation to predict and provide** for all of your child’s needs.
- **Give appropriate praise** by praising a child’s efforts and process rather than the person.
- **Say NO:** make giving something for nothing a rarity not a norm, but say NO in a caring way, not with anger.
- **Educate about the worth of things.** For example, take your kids to a store to show them the value of things and help them understand how much work you or they would have to do to earn the item.

- **Natural consequences.** Show kids what happens when they leave their dirty clothes on the floor and then don’t have clean clothes to wear; or show what happens when they don’t finish their school homework.
- **Gratitude journal:** writing down what you and your children are grateful for gives

maximum force and impact in terms of getting positive results for fostering kindness and gratitude.

“Each family is going to do this differently,” emphasizes Dr. Fry, “And it really needs to be tweaked according to the anxiety level of your child. Use a gentle touch.” ★

Resources

Dr. Carla Fry
www.drcarlafry.com

Roots of Empathy by Mary Gordon
www.rootsofempathy.org

Thnx4 is a sharable online gratitude journal — www.thnx4.org

BC Psychological Association
www.psychologists.bc.ca

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