

Positive Psychology in Action: Maximizing Family Gratitude



DR. CARLA FRY, R. PSYCH.

DR. LISA FERRARI, R. PSYCH.

Drs. Carla Fry and Lisa Ferrari are the founders of the Positive Psychology Centre Vancouver, promoting capable children, resilient individuals, resourceful parents, and strengthening family bonds (www.positivepsychologycentrevancouver.com). This article is based on excerpts from Dr. Ferrari and Dr. Fry's book: *Gratitude and Kindness: A Modern Parents Guide to Raising Children in an Era of Entitlement* (currently In Press).

"SOME OF MY GREATEST BLESSINGS CALL ME DADDY." ~ ANONYMOUS

Even if you don't specifically practice positive psychology or actually know a great deal about positive psychology, there are practices and research in the field that you want to pay attention to in your work with children, youth and families.

Every day parents come to us in our office panic-stricken that their choices might not be beneficial to their children.

We know what parents want: happy, kind, successful children. We know what they're fearful of: unhappy, unmotivated, lonely children. What these parents don't know is how to achieve what they want in their families.

We refer to one powerful and amazingly simple concept with all families that enter our offices: Gratitude. Gratitude can increase a child's happiness, decrease their stress, increase their ability to reach their goals, and allow them to have more caring friendships and social connections.

Positive Psychology offers up some of the most cutting edge research about human happiness today. Do not be fooled by its seeming simplicity: Gratitude is far from a new concept, but we now know how to maximize this experience, and conversely, how to miss maximizing this element as well. How we 'play out' our gratitude makes the difference in whether we end up boosting our happiness or not.

More than a simple emotion or attitude, gratefulness is a way of *being* that will improve your life and the lives of your clients. Robert Emmons (2003), one of the

world's most published and respected social scientists studying the effects of gratitude, stated "The ability to notice, appreciate, and savor the elements of one's life has been viewed as a crucial element of well-being" (p. 378).

What does a parent model when they profusely thank family members for each small effort at home, but when they are at a restaurant or store they act in an entitled, rude manner — or vice versa — when a parent takes great effort to tip waiters, taxi drivers and concierges, but almost never shows appreciation to their family at home?

Of course, as psychologists, we know the family home is the 'teaching ground' for children. We know that our behaviour directly influences our children, and when we are not authentic and consistent, we cause confusion. In our psychology practice we see it as essential that we help parents to have an awareness of the mixed messages they could send to their children. *Preaching* versus *practicing* the value of gratitude in different situations shows that we are not being authentic and consistent. Children can spot any lack of authenticity with eagle eyes and they will not 'swallow' our message if we are not real and consistent in how we act.

WHAT IS GRATITUDE?

Robert Emmons' research (2007), emphasized that gratitude is made up of two components. These components must be understood so that they can be applied.

- The first is that gratitude is an affirmation of goodness. By being grateful, we affirm that there are good things in the world that we have received.
- The second is that we recognize the source for this goodness is outside ourselves.

Robert Emmons and Mike McCullough (2003) researched the impact of keeping a gratitude journal. After 10 weeks, the group that focused on being grateful was more optimistic about their lives, less stressed and less depressed, and even visited the doctor less during that time. As it turns out, one could say, a 'thank you' a day, keeps the doctor away!

In light of this evidence, our clients are relieved when we let them know that this task doesn't have to actually be completed on a daily basis. We think your clients will be relieved too. In fact, researchers,

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deliberately models helping others. We encourage parents we work with to let their children know that the cookies their family is baking for their teachers represent a little extra effort to recognize and thank their teachers. We want parents to make the efforts of others obvious through talking in this way with their children.

3. **Modeling** Gratitude-Enhancing Deeds:

We make specific efforts to give parents do-able examples of positive modeling. We find that parent follow-through and success is improved greatly if they have some how-to's to guide them. Here are a few modeling examples we share:

- Casually demonstrate to your child the ways in which you are fulfilled and in which your needs are met in different areas; show them that you have an abundance of greatness in your own life. This may include *existing* activities, friends, community, comforts, and other things that give you pleasure.
- Try to avoid making “*obtaining things I want*” an activity or sport in front of children. Try not to let them see you cruising on online stores for objects of desire or taking them “window shopping” to generate a list of items you want to obtain.

- Avoid “acts of coveting” when your children are within earshot: I would love to have their home; I wish we had a nicer car; wouldn't it be nice to have that trip to Europe; I wish I had a nicer boss, kinder husband, etc.

We'd like to leave you with a fun gratitude challenge that we use in our offices: The Gratitude with Attitude NOT Words Challenge:

Imagine how you would show your gratitude to others if you had no voice. In this imagination exercise you also don't know sign language and cannot write. Remember no speaking:

1. How would you *express your gratitude* if you couldn't say thank you?
2. Come up with three unique ways to say *thank you*, without saying it.

Try this yourself. Try this with your children and with your clients and see what feedback you get!

Why do we pay attention to gratitude in our work with children and families? The simple answer is that gratitude leads to an abundance of life satisfaction, optimism, joy, pleasure, improved sleep, and a better immune system. It helps children and adults alike to be resilient, compassionate and forgiving. +

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