

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO BE *Thankful*

As you prepare for this busy holiday season, use the opportunity to continue nurturing thankfulness in your children, from babies to teens.



by Carol Albrecht

Six-year-old Emma opened the car door in front of a house festooned with multicolored balloons. She stepped carefully from the car, juggling a box wrapped in silver paper topped with a sparkly green bow. "Don't forget to say thank you," Mom called as Emma skipped up the walk.

"I won't," Emma shouted back.

When Mom returned after the party, she smiled as Emma slid into the front seat. "Did you remember to say thank you?"

Emma put her hand to her mouth. "Oh ... I guess I forgot."

Parents sometimes wonder if children ever get the message that saying thank you is important. Why do they seem to forget every time? And why do they need to be prompted so often?

than *taught*. We're teaching thankfulness every time we admire a rose or the beauty of a sunset. We teach thankfulness when we give an appreciative smile to a salesperson, when we thank a neighbor, or when we let our children know we're glad they're part of our family.

Thankfulness is a twin sister to praise. Any time we praise God in word or song, we're teaching thankfulness. Praise is also part of a thankful life, whether it's praise for a job well done, a pat on the head, or appreciation for someone's special talent.

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly how children "catch" thankfulness, but there are guidelines.

First of all, it's important for parents to say "thank you" often and to teach their children to do the same. "Thank you" should be among the first words a child learns. Children need frequent

grumbling and complaining. Children listen, and children learn. We can't say we're thankful and then spend our time griping about all the things that are wrong in our life and world. Children notice when our words don't match our attitudes. Guess which one they'll remember and emulate?

And, of course, we want to remember not to take God's blessings for granted. We need to resist the temptation to spoil our children or grandchildren. Overdosing on "things" doesn't make children grateful—it makes them greedy and selfish. Children who have less often are more thankful because they've learned to appreciate what's been given to them.

In the same vein, we should teach children to focus on the blessings they have, not on what they don't have. Our sinful human nature often wants what it doesn't have. God, with His perfect insight, gave us *two* commandments on coveting.

Here are some practical ways to instill thankfulness in children.

1. Pray before and after meals. This is a simple but important way to reinforce an attitude of thankfulness for the food we eat. I'm reminded of a time early in our marriage, when my husband and I went out to eat with friends and their 18-month-old child. As soon as the toddler was in the restaurant high chair, he banged a spoon on the tray, shouting, "Pray, pray, pray!" He knew that food always followed prayer, a first step in learning that prayer shows an appreciation to God for His daily blessings.

2. Family devotions in themselves give praise to God. By focusing some of them on the subject of thankfulness, we help our children develop an attitude of thanks. (*The "Searching Scripture" Bible study that fol-*

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The problem arises just because kids are kids. They have a lot to learn, and it's difficult for them to remember all the information flooding their developing brains. Besides that, children are born self-centered little beings. Until the age of 7 or 8, "Me" is the most important person in their life.

Does that mean parents should shrug their shoulders and wait a few years before teaching children thankfulness? Not at all! In fact, we're teaching our children attitudes—good and bad—long before they're able to independently apply that knowledge. Thankfulness is one of those attitudes.

That brings us to the next point. Thankfulness is really more *caught*

prompting in the early years, although eventually they'll remember on their own. (Teenagers, however, may need reminding from time to time.)

Secondly, we need to *live thankfully* and appreciate even small blessings and little pleasures. Sometimes children are actually better at this than we are. Have you ever watched a small boy playing in a rocky area? It isn't long until his pockets are filled with pebbles that caught his eye and became captivating "treasures." A parent who shares his delight reinforces for him that God makes all things well and deserves our thanks and praise—even for those now-special rocks.

Thirdly, we need to keep a lid on

lows this article can be a family devotion looking at why we should openly and frequently express thanks to God, not just on Thanksgiving. —Ed.)

- 3.** Bedtime prayers build strong habits and memories for you and your children to say thank you for the blessings of the day and focus your children on their loving heavenly Father as they fall asleep.
- 4.** Children also need to be taught that gifts and kind acts deserve to be recognized. Seeing you write thank-you notes is a beginning of that process. When a child is quite small, allow her to enclose a picture with your note as a way of saying thank you. As your children grow older, get them in the habit of writing thank-you notes to those who remember them. Guide them in buying their own note cards and pens to make the task more pleasant and personal for them.
- 5.** Volunteer with your older children to help at a food pantry or a homeless shelter. Serving the less fortunate is a memorable way to teach children thankfulness for their blessings.
- 6.** Put a large, empty sheet of paper on the wall or refrigerator. Have family members add words or pictures throughout the week of things for which they're thankful. Use the page during devotions or prayer time at the end of the week.
- 7.** Create a "Thanksgiving spot"—a small table, a box, or shelf. Let family members add pictures and objects that show things for which they're thankful. Set a time to gather routinely and share thoughts on what's been collected.
- 8.** Write a thankfulness poem as a family, or acronym the word thanks, writing one thing you're thankful for with each letter.
- 9.** Play the Alphabet Game, stating something you're thankful for that begins with "A." Family members take turns repeating the list and adding an item with the next letter until there are 26 items on the list. (This is a good travel game, too.)
- 10.** Together with your children, do something for a neighbor or a shut-in. Bake cookies, rake a lawn, or just take time to visit with someone who might be lonely.

There is no magic formula to make our children thankful. Thankfulness flows from a grateful heart and is a lifelong process. By staying in the Word ourselves and involving our children in it, we will help them to grow in appreciation for all God has given us. The psalms are filled with praise, and thankfulness is a key attitude in the New Testament.

Thankfulness doesn't happen overnight, but God has given us parents the days of childhood to model and teach what He so loves—an attitude of gratitude.



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