

Cultivating an attitude of thankfulness and gratitude

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How can we create an attitude of gratitude and share this with the children? A free expression of gratitude is born out of a loving connection. It grows from children feeling understood and appreciating kindness.

Genuine thankfulness

When I arrived at a friend's house earlier this week, her daughter ran to greet me at the door. Have you got me a present? she said. I took a small doll with sparkling clothes from my bag and handed it to her. Her face lit up with a big smile. Thank you, thank you. I love her!

Heartfelt thanks naturally emanate from gratitude. This is not the same as expressing thanks out of obligation, fear of punishment, or hope of a reward. Actions motivated by "must," "should," and "ought to" can block appreciation and gratitude.

One Sunday afternoon, my aunt Margaret visited our house. She handed me a soft package wrapped in brown paper. I felt excitement rise in my chest. I carefully peeled back the sticky tape that held the package's edges together. Inside was a blue cotton dress with bright yellow daisies all over it. My heart sank at the sight of it. I was about 10 years old.

Swallowing my tears, with eyes lowered, I said Thank you. Was I thankful for this moment? Did I feel grateful? Absolutely not! I didn't like the dress and never wanted to wear it. My overwhelming feeling was one of disappointment. I didn't show this. I was polite with a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Conflicting needs: honest self-expression versus care for another!

An inner conflict easily emerges in situations like this and can be challenging to resolve without adult support. Fortunately, my mum comforted me. She recognised my disappointment and that I didn't want my aunt to feel upset. My conflict was resolved!

Relationships rooted in compassion support emotional regulation, empathic communication, and an inner resilience for maintaining authenticity. We strengthen children through acceptance and love.

Rudolf Steiner writes: "An honest, entirely open feeling of gratitude must be developed, so that children experience it for everything received." (1)

The power of love

Many philosophers and spiritual teachers speak about the power of love. We have extensive scientific evidence of the positive impact of warm and responsive relationships on our biology and brain architecture. Loving-kindness lays the neural pathway for emotional and mental well-being.

Alex Korb, a UCLA neuroscience researcher, writes about this in his book *The Upward Spiral*. He says: It takes a commitment to heart-opening practice to rewire the brain for wellbeing and happiness. – thinking about what we are grateful for helps.

Here are a few suggestions for cultivating an attitude of gratitude with the children:

- Appreciate nature and all of life
Take time to look up at the sky and breathe the air, smell flowers, and see the beauty of the natural world. Notice the spider weaving its web in the corner of your house; listen to the sound of the morning chorus; watch the sunrise on the horizon, and enjoy the smell of the grass, full of the early morning dew. Search for ladybirds and seek out butterflies, play with puppies!
According to scientists, exposure to nature may reduce mortality. It makes you feel better emotionally, contributes to your physical well-being, reduces blood pressure and heart rate, and reduces muscle tension and the production of stress hormones, according to public health researchers Stamatakis and Mitchell.
- Affective connection through the senses
Watch babies: a mother gently stroking the hair of her child; an elderly man sitting on a bench chatting with his friend; the children as they enter your classroom and run around in the garden outside. Give full attention to each person, without barriers to connection. 20 years of research (Nonverbal encouragement of participation, Nicolas Guéguen) has concluded that nonverbal contact affects people's behaviour. This includes classroom activities that involve care through respectful contact. Express warmth through your eyes and a touch on the arm or shoulder.
- Find something positive about what you might experience as a negative situation
You may receive a complaint from a parent of a child in your class. She says she didn't like the way you spoke to her child, and he came home upset. Be curious about this meeting and consider it an opportunity for connection and learning. View conflicts between children as an opportunity to help them understand each other, foster resolution through dialogue, and commit to considering everyone's values.
- Take time to fully enjoy the experience of giving and receiving and expressing your appreciation.
Instead of saying "thank you, you're brilliant, wonderful," tell your colleagues and the children what it is they did that was wonderful for you. Let them know how this blessed your life and how you felt. And, when others say "thank you" to you, be curious about what it was that you did to enrich their experience of life. Bathe fully in the experience of giving and receiving, take time to connect to all the needs that are being met within you, as you receive this. Take time with children to appreciate the experiences they enjoy.
- Embrace mourning- find the hidden treasure in memories of connection.

It can be difficult to share our sadness and losses: people separate, and divorce, a relative or pet dies, or a friend moves away. A child leaves the school. Acknowledging that grief is part of life and giving space for it in your classroom is essential. Empathy can work its magic when a heartfelt connection is present between students and teachers.

- Keep a gratitude journal.

Set aside a few moments each day to remember 5 things you are grateful for. Write about these or share them with another person.

If it's difficult to think of things, you can start simply by being thankful for waking up, having some food to eat, water to drink, a bed to sleep in, a family, friends your health. When you spend time remembering how incredibly blessed you are, you will discover that this attitude begins to impact the rest of your day. Over time, this practice becomes a habit, and you will find that you are able to "catch" the blessings as they occur; it will become a living practice that brings you immense joy.

Share these practices with children in ways that are developmentally appropriate, natural, and engaging.

Hold gratitude-sharing circles and build a gratitude tree on the wall – children can write their own celebrations on leaves and place them on the branches. Sing gratitude songs using universal gestures to express self-connection and giving and receiving from the heart.

According to the HeartMath Institute, the heart emanates an electromagnetic field, fuelled by emotion that radiates and can be measured several feet away from the body. Gratitude is a feeling that expands the heart.

A few mindsets and practices you can adopt too:

1. Take time to transform your inner critic with self-compassion.
2. Give prime importance to the quality of connection in a relationship above behaviour modification
3. Trust in the innate intention of human beings to want to contribute to each other's well-being.
4. See problems and conflicts as an opportunity for learning and development.
5. Learn the language of the heart – hear the needs and values being expressed in situations.

My wish is that you and your colleagues work together to create a culture of thankfulness and gratitude between you that permeates the heart and soul of the community. If you have some ideas you would like to share, I would love to hear from you.

"For this feeling of gratitude is a bridge from one human soul and heart to another; without gratitude, this bridge could never be built." Rudolf Steiner

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