

Instilling Gratitude in Children

Top Q&As from Drs. Lauren and April's Webinar

What is gratitude and when are children able to understand this concept?

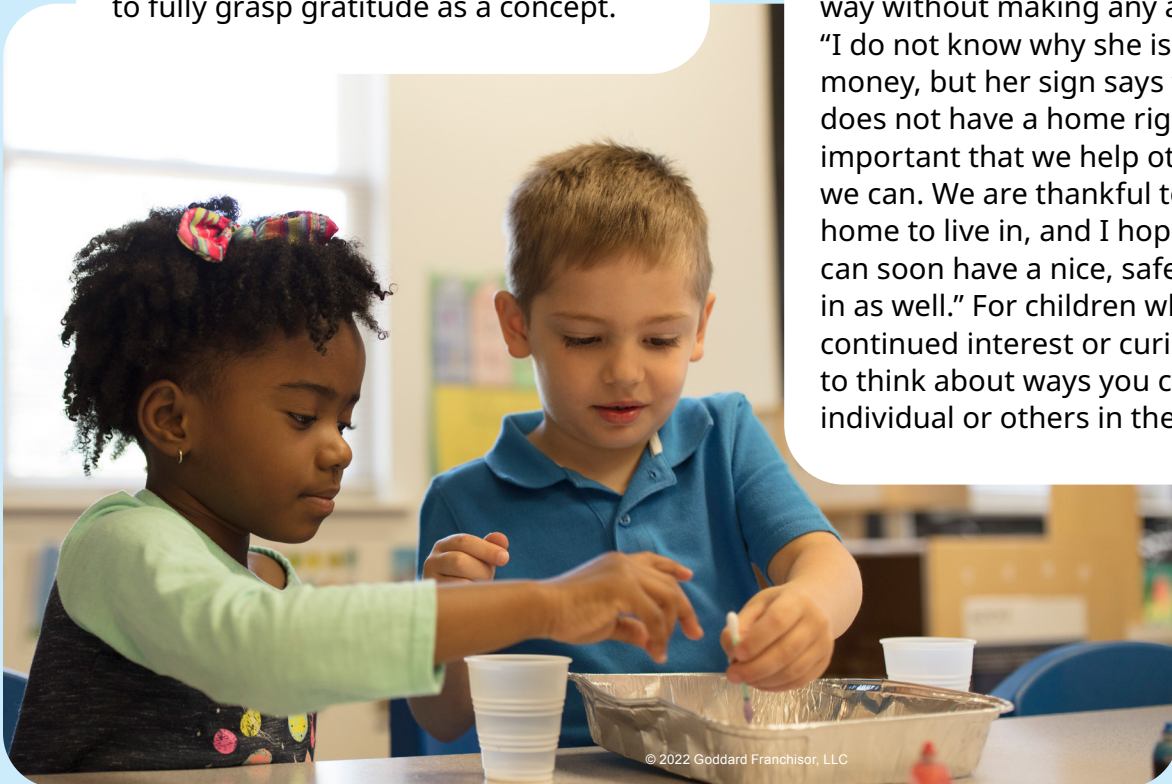
Gratitude is a positive emotion that involves being grateful and appreciative of things we have or experience. It's a broad concept for young children.

Before they can understand gratitude, children must be self-aware and have a well-developed concept of what it means to help others — either by donating goods, services or time. They also need empathy to recognize when other people contribute time, support or items. While infants and toddlers can and should be regularly prompted to sign or say "thank you," it's not until closer to age 3 that young children begin to fully grasp gratitude as a concept.

How should parents talk with children about people who are less fortunate in an age-appropriate way?

One of the facets of gratitude is helping children learn to appreciate what they have and what others have. When children are toddlers, it is important for parents to verbalize and point out what the child and family have to be thankful for in both material possessions and experiences, such as a favorite toy, a home or time spent with grandparents. It's also appropriate to note that not everyone has the same experiences or possessions.

For example, if a child is curious about a homeless person asking for money, you can respond in a simple, matter-of-fact way without making any assumptions. "I do not know why she is asking for money, but her sign says that she does not have a home right now. It's important that we help others when we can. We are thankful to have a safe home to live in, and I hope that she can soon have a nice, safe home to live in as well." For children who express continued interest or curiosity, ask them to think about ways you could help that individual or others in the community.



What are some meaningful things we can do as a family to help instill gratitude in our child?

It's important that we help children first look inward and reflect on their own talents, skills and possessions. We can prompt this by asking children, "What are some special things you can do?" "What are some special things we do that make you happy?" "What are some of your favorite things?"

Once you establish what your child has or can do, explain that others have different talents, experiences and material things. This helps children begin to develop empathy, awareness and appreciation of others.

Ask your child how they think they could share their special skills or do nice things to help other people. Try not to make children feel guilty, and instead focus on how happy they are with what they have and discuss how to bring that joy to others through gestures, kind deeds or material gifts. Think of gratitude beyond physical possessions.

I want my child to learn the importance of giving. Is my child too young to volunteer in the community?

There are many age-appropriate ways to help young children develop a sense of community and what it means to give to others. Consider an activity below that works best for your child's age and development. Talk with your child about the selected activity — whether they're giving time, a service or a tangible gift. Discuss the purpose of giving and ask how it makes them feel to help others.

- Identify people in the community that play a role in your child's day-to-day routines (package carriers, crossing guard, teachers, etc.) and help them find a way to express their gratitude for this person, such as a thank you note, picture, a home-made craft or even simply saying "thank you for helping me."
- Participate in local fun runs or charity walks for causes that resonate with your family. Pack your little one in the stroller and let them ride along! Talk with them about how they are helping.
- Volunteer at an animal shelter.
- Determine the needs of a local food pantry, shelter or children's hospital. Work with a small group of neighbors or friends to collect most-needed items. Then have your children help you assemble care packages. Younger children can help decorate the bags, which is part of the giving process!
- Visit a nursing home or assisted living home to play games, sing songs or talk with the residents.
- Participate in canned food drives, coat drives or toy drives. Allow your child to select and donate items.



My child seems to want everything they see. How can I set boundaries without feeling guilty?

This behavior can be challenging to navigate especially during the holiday season. Try to remember that the excessive want is in the moment; it's a temporary desire for your child. Finding balance in how often you oblige requests for treats, gifts and toys is important. Children are more likely to experience gratitude for these things when they do not receive something every time they ask.

Combat parent guilt by walking yourself through the outcomes. If I say no to this request, what is the outcome? My child may cry or express disappointment, but in 15-30 minutes they will likely have moved on. Children are resilient in this way — more than we give them credit for.

Remember that it takes time, patience and multiple opportunities to develop gratitude. Research shows that both older children and adults who express gratitude routinely are happier individuals, with more positive mindsets and greater self-management skills. So, setting boundaries now has the potential to strengthen ongoing social-emotional development in the future.

What are some book recommendations to help my child understand gratitude?

Children's literature is a powerful tool to help illustrate unfamiliar or abstract concepts for children. Seeing examples and storylines come to life helps children better understand a concept. Cozy up this holiday season and enjoy some of these great selections on gratitude!

- *The Thankful Book* by Todd Par
- *Bear Says Thanks* by Karma Wilson and Jane Chapman
- *Gratitude is My Superpower* by Alicia Ortego
- *The Gratitude Jar* by Katrina Liu and Bella Ansori
- *The 123s of Thankfulness* by Patricia Hegarty, illustrated by Summer Macon
- *When Grandma Gives You a Lemon Tree* by Jamie Deenihan, illustrated by Lorraine Rocha
- *Thankful* by Elaine Vickers
- *The Giving Snowman* by Julia Zheng, illustrated by Graziella Miligi
- *Thank You, Omu!* by Mora Oge
- *The Thank You Book* by Mary Lyn Ray, illustrated by Stephanie Graegin

