

Live a Grateful Life

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As educators, we hear a lot from business and industry about the need to teach our young people what are called soft skills. Teaching our students facts and technical skills may help them get a job that pays well. Developing soft skills can help them keep the job and advance to improved standing in their workplace. Soft skills include, among other things, communication, the ability to collaborate as a team and solve problems, being self-motivated, setting attainable goals, and thinking critically. These important attributes are necessary to thrive in today's world. One trait I would classify as one of the most important soft skills a person of any age can develop is that of gratitude and appreciation, not only for material goods but also for the contributions of others.

Although it is important for success, sincere gratitude can be one of the most difficult qualities to teach to children and adults. One of the first things most of us taught our children was to say "please" and "thank you." In doing this, I doubt that many of us realized we were teaching them something that could affect their lives so significantly. Researchers in the field of positive psychology have found that developing gratitude for the simple things in life is emotionally, physically, and mentally rewarding. People who can express gratitude to other people improve their overall level of happiness and health.

America is the most blessed nation in the world. In today's American society, we are so accustomed to the many privileges we have in this country that we tend to equate the collection of "things" with happiness. We have grown to expect immediate gratification and as parents we want to give our children the many material things that seem to make them happy. Where our parents had to work and save for major purchases, we are accustomed to financing whatever we feel we need. We know what we want and we want it now! It is natural to want our children to have the best things in life and there is nothing wrong with providing nice things for our children. The problem comes when our children began to believe they are entitled to these things or that they do not have to work or sacrifice in order to obtain nice things.

Parents are a child's first and most influential teachers. The child needs to see parents expressing gratitude for simple things like heat, air-conditioning, good food to eat, and fresh water. Most importantly, children need to see the adults in their lives respecting the rights of others and appreciating the contributions made by others. We need to teach our children to treat all people as they would want to be treated. "Please" and "thank you" need to be more than words that they say and the best way to teach this is through example.

Thankfulness should not be just a good feeling we get when we receive the things we want. Thankfulness should be a natural way of looking at all situations while constantly looking for the good in people and circumstances. It should be an all-the-time gratitude. One of my pet peeves in the classroom was when I would ask a child to perform some small task such as picking up paper in the classroom and their response would be to ask what I would give them for doing the task. Today's society is often one of entitlement. Sometimes children and adults think they deserve certain goods or rights just because they are who they are. Part of that may be due to the fact that we live in such a blessed nation and have become accustomed to the many blessings we enjoy here. Many things that we take for granted do not exist in other nations and unless we teach our children to be thankful and take care of these resources, they could cease to exist here.

This is the time of year when our thoughts turn to thanksgiving and gratitude for our many blessings. As educators, parents, grandparents, or other significant adults in a child's life, we should make it a practice of looking for things to be grateful for every day. I am reminded of a quote from President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."