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Know! Gratitude for the Health of It

November is here to kick off the holiday season. Just like most things in 2020, Thanksgiving is bound to look different this year due to COVID-19. At a time when we might normally be gearing up to travel to grandma's house or preparing to host extended family members for dinner, this time around we may be forced to break yet another tradition. But instead of dwelling on the negative, it is more important than ever that we count our blessings and focus on gratitude—for the health of it.

Experts say there is actual science behind being grateful, and that it is central to our physical and mental health. "Grateful people are healthier, happier, and more satisfied with their lives," says Dr. Christine Carter, a Berkeley researcher whose work is focused on the science of happiness. "They are more resilient and have a higher sense of self-worth. Grateful teens are less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs and less likely to have behavior problems at school. The list goes on and on."

On a neurological level, Dr. Carter says we're more likely to experience an increased flow of dopamine (a neurotransmitter in our brain known to make us feel happy) when we practice gratitude. We are more likely to feel alert and cheerful, and gratitude increases activity in our brain's hypothalamus, which impacts metabolism and stress levels. To put it in the simplest of terms, gratitude is like superfood for our brains.

How to Foster Gratitude in Children and Ourselves

All of us can benefit from happier brains, right? So, what can we do this holiday season and beyond to exercise gratitude, and foster it in our children?

Be the Example: It starts with us. We must teach by our words and actions. When was the last time you thanked your child for something they did or said, for not just the big accomplishments, but the little things? How about your spouse or partner? Let your children see and hear your gratefulness for things that might usually be taken for granted, like your spouse going to work or doing household chores.

Volunteer Together: This is a win-win, because you and your child can work together to help someone or some cause, which is a great thing. It feels really good in return, which is also a great thing. The opportunities to help, especially at this time of the year, are endless:

- Collect canned goods for a local shelter
- Host a blanket or coat drive
- Give your time at a local soup kitchen
- Rake an elderly neighbor's leaves
- Bake cookies for someone who may be feeling down

Encourage Your Children To Express Gratitude: Expressing one's gratefulness is more impactful for good health than just feeling it within. There are many ways to show one's gratitude, but a fun activity tweens and teens seem to enjoy is creating gratitude rocks. If you've never heard of this before, you can Google it for instructions and ideas. They are simple to create. You only need paint, some smooth rocks, and a personal word or saying that expresses your thanks. These rocks can then be placed around the Thanksgiving table or throughout your community to share with others.

Practice Looking For The Good: Children can be taught that even if they receive a gift that does not thrill or excite them, they can find good in it. For example, that homemade pumpkin pie the neighbor brought over was amazing, except your child doesn't like pumpkin pie. This is a perfect opportunity to teach your child to be mindful of the neighbor's thoughtfulness, time, and energy that was put into baking this pie for your family—and be grateful.

Thank You Notes: Handwritten thank you notes have become a lost art in the age of technology. But they are a wonderful way for teens (and adults) to outwardly express their gratitude to friends and family. And what better way to kick off the holiday season than gifting your child with a box of card stock, envelopes, and colored pens to create their own thank you notes.

While the holidays may look and feel different this year, there are still plenty of reasons to be thankful and feel grateful. Let this time of year be the starting point of what becomes a regular practice of gratitude on a regular basis.

Sources

[Walsh, Erin. Spark & Stitch Institute: The Science of Gratitude in Kids. Nov. 2013.](#)
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