

## Grateful Parenting

by Anne Dunlea

### Two Kinds of Grateful Parenting

Grateful Parenting invokes two complementary ideas for me. On the one hand, it suggests being a parent who practices gratefulness, who lives gratefully; including being grateful to parent, to lovingly care for a child. Such a parent would then, hopefully, role model gratefulness and infuse the home with grateful practices. On the other hand, grateful parenting also suggests being grateful for one's particular child, being aware and appreciative of the gifts and qualities that child has. It suggests respecting one's child as a person, and all that ensues from such an open positive attitude.

As a developmental scientist and a person who embraces grateful living, I'd like to explore some of the implications of what it means to parent gratefully. For both parent and child.

Feeling and acting with respect and appreciation for others is perhaps the most gracious way of living. It is rooted in the premise that all of us share the same fundamental need to be recognized and valued for who we are. It rests in an understanding that each person has within, a set of qualities and capabilities that are good and positive, though sometimes these may be hidden and buried by challenging life experiences. Setting aside exceptional instances—where pathologies or extremely difficult social conditions occlude inner goodness—when people are treated with an openness that acknowledges them as valuable, they are best able to interact, negotiate, compromise and simply feel good about themselves and others.

This graciousness can be a cornerstone to thoughtful effective parenting.

### An Antidote to Oblivion

Gratitude involves letting yourself accept the gifts that come to you, both material and immaterial. Most of us feel it would be rude to refuse a material gift offered by a friend. Yet we often fail to notice the countless gifts offered to us by nature or good health or delightful experiences. It seems to me, that failing to notice is rather like refusing a gift. In both cases, we distance ourselves and miss out on full enjoyment. Grateful living is, of course, an antidote to that oblivion. Curiously, when I work with parents, I often sense a kind of oblivion. Most parents deeply love their child, but more than a few are surprised when I ask them why they like their child. That's rather telling. It suggests that we parents are often not very conscious of the gifts and qualities our child has. We don't keep those in our mental awareness. But what if we did?

What would it be like to parent, to guide our child's development, with a day-to-day

awareness of our child's likable strong points? What if we felt gratitude for those things and held that gratitude in our hearts and minds? With those good qualities and capabilities in the forefront, we would be less critical and less disappointed by unskillful behaviors. We wouldn't notice every bad thing, wouldn't be ever on the look out for the next thing to correct. Our children would thrive with a clear sense that they are valued and they would have a greater feeling of well-being. We would be more likely to trust our child to rise to challenges and act responsibly when we know they are engaged in ways that draw on strengths. We would also know when our support and guidance are actually needed. Trust and appropriate support, rather than hovering or disregard.

### What is Responsible Parenting?

If you're a parent, what happens when your child walks into the room? Most of the time we click into responsibility mode or caregiving mode. We check to see if a toddler's shoes are on the right feet; ask a preschooler what she's doing; find out if our child is feeling hungry; ask if there's a spelling test tomorrow; remind a teen about a project that needs to be worked on; notice the time to see what we — or our child — should be doing next. These reactions come from our caring, wanting to support, wanting to make sure things are okay. It feels like responsible parenting.

How do our children feel when we do that? They see our concern, or our critical expression. They may have a sinking feeling that they haven't done something. They may think, "oh - oh, what's wrong now." One remarkable benefit of grateful parenting is that we step more easily out of this critical on-the-lookout mode. We are more likely to greet with a smile and a zap of connection. As a result, both we and our child experience a huge reduction in stress and a nice boost in happiness and ease of being. The first thing you and your child experience on seeing one another is what's good, not what's wrong. Any important caregiving can follow afterwards.

### Discipline

These kinds of feelings extend to ways we discipline. Genuinely appreciating the gifts of our particular child inclines us to keep challenges in perspective. Two brain related phenomena contribute to this tendency: the cognitive process of priming and the neurological process of building and strengthening neural circuitry.

Consciously bringing into awareness your child's likable gifts and qualities keeps these in the forefront of your mind and brain, mediating how you respond to disappointing behavior and challenging situations.

Priming is a kind of activation. It is one of the main reasons why "setting intentions" works. During the 1970s researchers found that if the brain has recently responded to a stimulus, such as recognizing the color turquoise, or the spoken word "ball," the recent processing has the effect of priming subsequent recognitions, meaning similar future responses are faster and often more accurate. In these examples, we would more quickly recognize a new instance of turquoise than of, say, navy blue or maroon; we would recognize the word "ball" faster than the word "dog." These early studies measured milliseconds of reaction time, but the general principle can be extended. Priming makes things more cognitively salient. It is an aspect of memory. Parenting gratefully means you often draw to mind your child's good qualities, and as a result, these become more cognitively salient and they work as memory clues to what you find important. You can

take this one step further by consciously being grateful during challenging moments. An often repeated bit of parenting advice is to pause when you feel cross with your child and wait a moment before you react. The goal of that advice is to help you calm down, the proverbial, “take a deep breath” before you respond. If, during that pause, you draw to mind something you feel grateful for about that child, you are even less likely to react with anger and more likely to react with meaningful guidance.

Reared with practices such as gratefulness, they have more empathy and altruistic behavior, enjoy rich rewarding friendships, show qualities of resilience, confidence, self-regulation and overall positivity.

Building and strengthening neurocircuitry is a related process. The brain responds to experiences by building circuits based on various factors, including intensity and frequency. (That is, in fact, how much of development happens.) Quite simply, repeatedly doing or thinking something makes the neurological pathways involved stronger, more efficient, and more quickly accessed. Consciously bringing into awareness your child’s likable gifts and qualities keeps these in the forefront of your mind and brain, mediating how you respond to disappointing behavior and challenging situations. When you regularly view your child with a feeling of gratefulness, you are more likely to respond in a measured way with a goal of guiding rather than shaming, diminishing, or harshly punishing your child in some other way. The perspective of appreciation inclines thoughtful authoritative parenting. Wise parenting.

### Grateful Practices at Home

Another aspect of Grateful Parenting is creating a home imbued with grateful practices, living with an attitude of appreciation and wonder for all that is present. As you will know from numerous articles on this website and other sources, science research consistently reports that grateful people are happier, more positive and have better relationships with others than those who are less grateful. What a springboard for life! Many adults today spend a fair amount of time trying to build qualities like resilience, empathy, and positivity, or finding ways to reduce internal stress. They do this by engaging in gratefulness and other mindfulness practices, perhaps meditating, journaling, or using other activities to build up the positive areas of their brain and the resulting sense of well-being. While the science behind this is too new to draw clear developmental conclusions, and way too young to benefit from the findings of multi-decade longitudinal studies, the early evidence coming in is pretty compelling — children’s quickly responding agile brains thrive in this kind of environment. Reared with practices such as gratefulness, they have more empathy and altruistic behavior, enjoy rich rewarding friendships, show qualities of resilience, confidence, self-regulation and overall positivity. They are happier and less stressed.

The benefits of gratefulness in relationships between parent and child seem to be bi-directional. Key among these I think are:

- Parents appreciate their children more and are more likely to notice and reinforce what is good.
- Children feel respected and appreciated. Their gifts are noticed, which in turn bolsters confidence and self-esteem.

-- Trust is strengthened on the part of both parent and child. A child who feels valued, appreciated and respected can much more easily trust a parent and accept guidance from them. Similarly, parents feel more trust and confidence in a child they know appreciates and trusts them.

### Passing Down Grateful Living

As research psychologist Robert Emmons has observed, gratitude strengthens relationships because we notice how someone supports us or is valuable to us. It creates a sense of appreciation that colors how we interact with that person. That sense of appreciation extends from both parent to child and child to parent, creating a richly respectful and trusting relationship that flourishes.

Grateful parenting, and rearing children to live gratefully, hints at a tantalizing further benefit, beyond those involving parent and child. It opens the possibility that some of the newest generation will live natively in gratefulness. Perhaps they will be caring stewards of their planet, will appreciate and value the vast web that connects us all, and will interact with others in curious, open and respectful ways. It might mean, as Brother David has said, they will “let the gratefulness overflow into blessings all around [them].”