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Teaching Kids
to be Thankful

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Teaching "Thankfulness" to Children

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Traditionally, in classrooms around the United States, November is the month when teachers focus on teaching students about "thankfulness." Whether it is merely a discussion about reasons for being thankful or a written assignment like an essay, students begin to think about the blessings they have received. Often, the Thanksgiving holiday celebrated during the month of November, motivates these activities. That is not to say the virtue of "thankfulness" isn't discussed at other times or in different parts of the curriculum throughout the school year, but November seems to be the month for a deeper concentration of "thankful" projects.

Thankfulness as defined by Webster's Children's Dictionary is the act of feeling or showing thanks or being grateful. How do we teach children this virtue? Many parents begin at a very young age by modeling thankful behavior like saying "thank you" to someone for a kind gesture or responding to an act of kindness with a reciprocal "act of kindness." Other ways parents teach "thankfulness" is by including children in activities that demonstrate thankfulness. Some examples of these kinds of activities include allowing children to gather food at the grocery store in preparing a food bag for a local food pantry, supporting special projects they may choose to participate in or allowing them to earn money for a cause such as purchasing books for school libraries. Children of all ages can help collect blankets for the homeless. Older children might rally friends to knit scarves for the homeless or hold a bake sale to raise money for a cause like childhood Leukemia. Students can visit a retirement community and participate in activities like Bingo with the residents. There are many ways adults help children reflect on their own blessings and then give something to others in gratitude for these blessings.


Children learn by observing adult behavior, and by what they themselves do. In addition to being a role model for thankful behavior, adults can help kids understand how the blessings in their lives translate into activities that show their thankfulness to others. Parents can begin by asking children to make a list of ways they can show thankfulness to others. Parents can help their children brainstorm a list of projects in which the whole family

or some of the family can participate, such as volunteering. Here are some examples:

- Being thankful for having clothing and toys with which to play might translate into cleaning out the closets and donating gently used clothing and toys to Goodwill or other needy organizations.
- Being thankful for healthy bodies might translate into visiting a children's hospital to play games or read books to the hospitalized children.
- Being thankful for strong bodies might translate into volunteering to shovel a neighbor's driveway, rake leaves, or walk a neighbor's dog.
- Writing thank you notes to the troops and sending cards with care packages is a wonderful way to say, "I am thankful for the freedoms you protect."

During this time in our culture when technology rules, fewer young people want to write "thank you notes" or make phone calls with simple words of "thankfulness." Here is another opportunity for adults to model thankfulness by encouraging their children to write a thank you note or make a phone call. When children are young, we have more control over their behavior and their time. We can sit at the kitchen table

with our markers ready and say, "Let's make a card for Aunt Sue and thank her for that video game she sent you for your birthday." The older and more independent children become the less eager they are to cooperate with the task of writing thank you notes. I know it was this way with my own kids. When they were young, they were diligent about sending creatively constructed thank you notes. Now, as young adults, they would much rather send an email or a text message to express their appreciation. Although they are older, I continue to remind them that showing their gratitude in some way is a must. It demonstrates that you care enough to make the extra effort to appreciate someone's thoughtfulness.

It is important to be patient with our children and accepting of whatever way they chose to say thank you. Equally important is that no matter how old they become, we continue to encourage them and not give in to their resistance. Being thankful for all that we have, realizing how truly blessed we are, and showing thankfulness is important. The virtue of thankfulness needs to be taught beginning at an early age and encouraged throughout our children's lives. 

HERE ARE SOME BOOKS ABOUT "THANKFULNESS" THAT YOU CAN SHARE WITH YOUR CHILDREN

- **Thanks a Million** written by Nikki Grimes and illustrated by Cozbi A. Cabrera, ©2006, China: Harper Collins/Greenwillow Books. Ages 5-up. A collection of insightful poems about thankfulness and life.
- **Thanks for Thanksgiving** written by Julie Markes and illustrated by Doris Barrette, ©2004, China: Harper Collins Publishers. Ages 3-7. A sweet and simple list of all the things we can be thankful for as children are developing an awareness of what it means to be "thankful."
- **Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message** written by Chief Jake Swamp and illustrated by Erwin Printup, Jr., ©1995, New York: Lee & Low Books. Ages 5-9. A book about peace and appreciation of mother earth, all her inhabitants, and her gifts. (free teaching guide at www.leeandlow.com/teacher)
- **Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen** written and illustrated by Dyanne DiSalvo-Ryan, ©1997. New York: Mulberry Books. Ages 6-10. A young boy helps his uncle in a soup kitchen and learns the importance of helping less fortunate people.
- **The Lady in the Box** written by Ann McGovern and illustrated by Mami Backer. Ages 5-9. Ben and his sister deliver food and a warm scarf to a homeless woman in spite of their mother's warning never to talk to strangers. (<http://www.kidbibis.com>)
- **Moxy Moxwell Does Not Like Writing Thank-You Notes** written by Peggy Gifford and illustrated by Valorie Fischer. ©2008. New York: Schwartz and Wade Books and imprint of Random House Children's Books. Ages 8 and up. Moxy has promised to write 12 thank-you notes by the day after Christmas so that she and her twin brother can go to Hollywood to visit their father, but all her brilliant quick scheme ideas to finish the notes cause chaos in the house.
- **Feeling Thankful** written by Shelley Rotner and Sheila Kelly, ED.D. ©2000. Photograph by Shelley Rotner. Brookfield: Millbrook Press. Ages 2-6. Charming photographs of children and the things that they are thankful for.
- **Thanksgiving is...** written and illustrated by Gail Gibbons. ©2004. New York: Holiday House. Ages 5-8. Ms. Gibbons writes and illustrates this beautiful book about the holiday of Thanksgiving beginning with the early Egyptian, Greek, and Roman traditions travelling through history to present day.
- **Thanksgiving Day at Our House** written by Nancy White Carlstrom and illustrated by R. W. Alley ©1999. New York: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers. Ages 3-8. A collection of Thanksgiving and thankful poems with delightful illustrations and entertaining rhymes.