



Preparing for the Month of Thankfulness

In America, in November, we take a collective and personal inventory of our blessings and celebrate them with our families around dining room tables laden with delectable foods. Some of us, with our children in tow, go to shelters to share our bounty with less fortunate people. Or we make contributions to social service agencies. We Americans are a generous people. We give from the heart.

Giving from the heart means we will take every precaution not to embarrass the recipients by making them feel inferior in any way. It means not giving begrudgingly and it means giving without conditions. Giving becomes an art when we take the time to know a person well enough to know what would please him or her.

Gracious receiving is also an art. "Oh, you shouldn't have," doesn't exactly communicate appreciation. In fact, it makes me wonder whether I should have bothered at all. On the other hand, the choreography of the givers' generosity and the recipients' gracious acceptance is a warm and bonding experience. Now, how do we develop both qualities in our children?

We try by telling our children to say "Thank you" over and over and over again with the hope that they will eventually "get it." But what is it we hope they'll get? Good manners? Sure, we want our children to be polite, but we soon find out that saying thanks is not the same as giving thanks. Before we tackle the issue of gratitude, we need to see that we are living in a world of gadgets, toys, plastics, and technologies without end. Before we get the new computer or cell phone home from the store, a new and better one is on the store shelves. We can't keep up, and we're in a constant state of dissatisfaction with what we have for the want of the latest, best, biggest, clearest thing-a-ma-jig of all.

Our children are bombarded with "gotta-haves." Their friends, neighbors, schoolmates, and television commercials tell them that there is something better out there and life is not worth living without it. "Oh, thank you, Mommy/Daddy," lasts until the next best thing comes out and we begin to wonder how grateful they really are. So how can we help our children develop a sense of gratitude for what they have? How do we engender in them a spirit of generosity, a heart-felt giving of themselves?

First, we need to see what the children see in the people around them. Are they exposed to the spirit of generosity, especially where they are concerned? A parent's generosity to the next door neighbor will have little effect if the child is not also the recipient of good-hearted giving.

In an earlier column, I quoted educator, Eda LeShan when she defined the "spoiled child." Mrs. LeShan said, "The spoiled child is one who gets too much of the wrong thing and not enough of the right." She defined the right thing as attention, good attention, loving attention, undivided attention. In the absence of attention, children will try to fill the void in their lives with things, or food, or bad habits, or difficult behaviors.

So the very act of paying attention to children is their first understanding of giving. When we give to them, they get what it takes for them to give.

Paying attention to children fosters gratitude as it fills as basic a need as food or water. And the natural result of gratitude is reciprocity! I used to sing this little song to my children: I give to you and you give to me and that is reciprocity. The more we fill that basic need, the greater is their feeling to "repay."

They will want to give back, not because we ask them to, but because they have it in their hearts to give. And it works as well for us. When our children offer their help, or cooperate willingly, sometimes even cheerfully, don't we automatically feel the urge to do something for them in return?

Have you and your children ever made a list of reasons to be grateful? It could be very revealing. It might let you all know what each of you values, what each of you appreciates, and what each of you cares about. It's a good starting point for developing an attitude of gratitude.

Speaking of gratitude, I am especially grateful this month. I turned 82.

Molly Koch is reprinted here with permission from Baltimore's Child Magazine. You can also find Molly at mollybkoch.com and keeptheconnection.org.