

Commentary... Strategies for teaching gratitude

By Mitchell Luftig
Columnist

Parents attempt to provide every one of their children with equal portions of love, affection, kindness, and support. Logically, children growing up in the same family, treated the same way, should be quite similar in their ability to experience positive emotions, such as joy, interest, energized, alert, enthusiastic, contentment, pride, cheerfulness, optimism, and happiness. However research tells us that children inherit very different built-in limits to their capacity to experience positive emotions — determined by their set point.

Some children — let’s call them “Eeyores” — inherit a very low set point. Such children appear down-in-the-dumps, bemoaning their fate, and seeing little to look forward to in life. When the child with a low set point experiences a manifestly positive event—they are invited to the birthday party of the most popular student in their class—they will experience a surge in positive emotions and the child’s usual negativity seems to lift. Eventually, the “tyranny” of the set point kicks in and the child returns to their gloomy self.

The good news is that a child’s set point for positive emotions accounts for only 50 percent of what makes them happy. So there is hope, even for those children who are more akin to Eeyore than to Winnie the Pooh.

Beyond the set point for positive emotions, the environment a child grows up in accounts for another ten percent of their happiness. Children with a high set point for positive emotions will likely adapt successfully to a challenging environment, whereas children with a low set point for positive emotions are more likely to remain unhappy, even in ideal circumstances.

The remaining 40 percent of what determines a child’s happiness depends upon the lens the child uses

to view their world. When children can see that the conditions they need to be happy already exist, they may rise above their set point and their environment to become happier people.

Practicing gratitude is a skill that enables children to rise above their set point for positive emotions. Andrea Hussong defines it this way: “Gratitude is how you make sense of what you’ve been given — your feelings and thoughts about those gifts. And then how you act on that to show appreciation.”

Grateful children are happier and more satisfied with their lives and with their friends, family, neighborhood and selves. Grateful children report more hope, engagement with their hobbies, higher GPAs, and less envy, depression, and materialism: The Gratitude Project.

When children look at their world through the lens of gratitude, they see a world where people care about one another and treat each other with kindness. Ungrateful children see a world in which people are indifferent to one another.

Children with relatively low set points for positive emotions benefit the most from strategies to increase gratitude; however, most children will receive some benefit.

Three strategies to increase a child’s gratitude:

- Parental modeling of gratitude is one of the most powerful ways to teach children how to count their blessings. The more often children observe their parents express sincere gratitude to others, the more likely they are to internalize gratitude as an important value.

The threat of the coronavirus has provided everyone with a shocking reminder that life is fragile and life is precious. Parents, if you haven’t already done so, consider taking this opportunity to model gratitude by telling the people you love how grateful you are that they are healthy and a part of your life. When the pandemic passes, continue to

count your blessings—out loud so your children can hear you (e.g., thank children for completing their chores or sharing possessions, thank a family member for preparing a meal).

- Parents can also teach gratitude through daily interactions and conversations with their children. When a sibling or peer treats a child in a friendly manner, remind the child that a sincere thank you makes the other child feel good, too.

- When children feel they are owed kindness (feel entitled), point out that if the child does not show their appreciation, others may no longer be kind to them.

- Volunteering as a family at a homeless shelter can provide a valuable lesson in humility and gratitude. Parents can also encourage their children to play with grateful peers and discourage them for hanging out with peers who feel entitled.

Additional innovative strategies to teach children gratitude, offered by Sarah Conway:

- Develop a dinner ritual where each family member names one thing they are grateful for.

- Draw slips from a gratitude jar and read them aloud, so family members learn what the author of the slip is grateful for.

- Teach children the importance of expressing appreciation.

- Take a family gratitude walk, appreciating the beauty of the natural world.

- Encourage random acts of kindness, ensuring that each act of kindness is acknowledged by other family members.

- Invite older children to keep a gratitude journal, writing down three things a day (or every few days) for which they are grateful.

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trend that is supporting residential prices in Central Oregon.

5. Rents, Renters and Investors:

This shutdown has tossed tens of thousands of people across the economic spectrum out of work. Riots are only going to make this worse, as many of the destroyed businesses and jobs aren’t coming back. And unfortunately, renters (who trend toward the lower end of the income scale) are taking the brunt of it.

That said, most landlords realize that mass evictions for non-payment are self-defeating. And most tenants realize that not paying rent and all but destroying their credit and rental history is

equally self-defeating. So most have reached some sort of “pay what you can” scenario and are dealing with it. My advice to clients with unemployed tenants has been: “Be kind, be patient, and be realistic.”

In short, we have a very dynamic situation that is impossible to predict. That said, we have some strong trends that should support the Central Oregon market in both the short and long-term. But to answer the question of: “When will this madness be over?” Nobody knows, only: “This too shall pass.”

Mike Zoomajian is principal at WetDog Properties in Sisters. Providing local property management and investor services. Questions, comments to: letters@wetdogpnw.com. Free legal advice is worth what you pay for it. Consult a real attorney before doing anything crazy.

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