



More than “Thank You” Creating a Cycle of Gratitude

The Developing Gratitude Research Group

The Developing Gratitude Research Group...

...consists of two collaborative groups. One is in the United States, based primarily at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.



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The other is in Brazil, based in the Institute of Psychology at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.



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Gratitude is more than “thank you!”

Thank you is polite, and we all should get our kids to be polite...

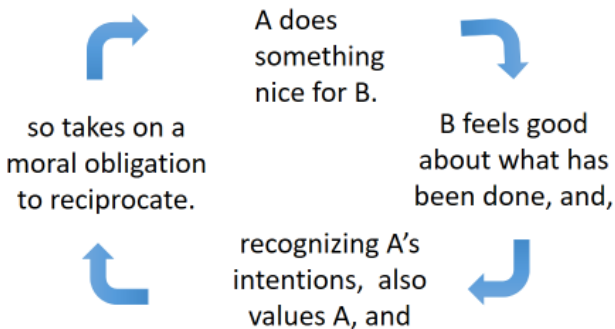
and

Gratitude is more than appreciation

It's nice to appreciate a beautiful day, a great meal, friendship, having the latest gadget, but...gratitude is different from any of these things.

Gratitude...what is it?

The Cycle of Gratitude



Gratitude is something that we feel toward another person who has done something nice for us. But we don't just feel good toward that person...we want to do something that will make him or her feel good as well.

Gratitude, thought of in this way, **builds connections.**

This story illustrates the importance of gratitude that builds connections between people.

Auntie Lia has bought Terri a lovely birthday gift.

Terri says “thank you” for the gift, and that’s a good (polite) start.

Terri really likes the gift, and feels good about getting it.

BUT...real gratitude means Terri feeling good about Auntie Lia and thinking about what could be done for Auntie Lia to make her feel good in return.

Why?

We know a school principal whose children were showered with gifts from their in-laws, but the in-laws were rarely around, and now that the kids are grown they have no connection with those grandparents. When her daughter had a child, the principal did exactly the same thing—providing lots of gifts. Her daughter took her aside and said: “Don’t repeat the same mistake...what they want is YOU.”

So let’s focus NOT on the gifts, but on the giver, and if the child feels good about the giver, and wants to do something in return, a connection is built or strengthened.

Gifts don’t build relationships—feeling good about others and giving back when you can and when it’s appropriate to do so builds relationships. And that’s what real gratitude does.

And this is what we study—how children develop this type of gratitude, the gratitude that builds connections with others. We call it

“Connective Gratitude.”



How we Study Gratitude

First we ask children, aged 7 to 14, what their greatest wish is.

The following are some examples of children's wishes—some are for immediate pleasure, some are for self-focused wishes for the future, and some are wishes for others.

These are examples of some children's wishes for immediate pleasure.

- I wish I had my hole [whole] toys and [drawing of big house with child and toys in the house] and my own planet [drawing of planet].*
- Be a princess.*
- To go to the moon or be a astornot [astronaut] (though we have rodats [robots] that do that.)*
- I wish I could have a baby sister. I would like an iPhone too.*
- One million dollars.*

Other children wished for things for themselves, but in the future.

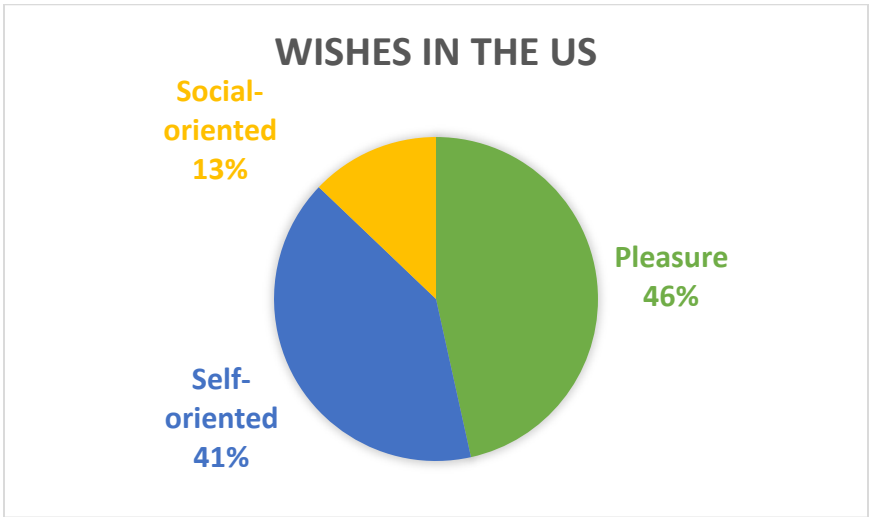
- To grow up and have a nice family and housband [husband] and have one set of twins, a boy and a girl, also I don't want to get divorced.*
- My greatest wish is to just live an eventful, happy life because I only have one life.*

Some wished for things to help others.

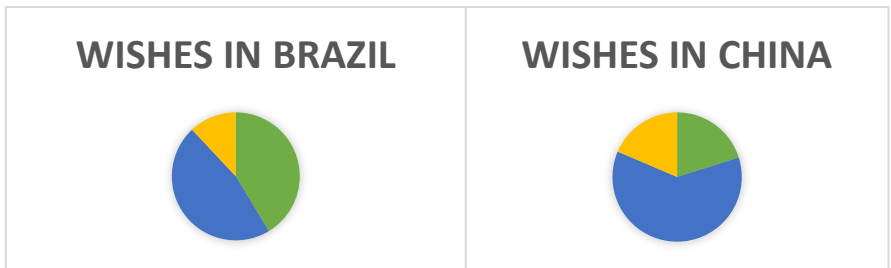
- To give my parents money to pay for the bills.*
- My greatest wish is to stop hatrid [hatred] in the world. Specifically animal cruelty, world peace, and no poverty!*
- My greatest wish is for world peace and no racial tension.*

As you can see, in Greensboro almost half (46%) of the wishes were for things to bring immediate pleasure, and almost the same number of wishes were for the children themselves for when they were older. Just 13% of them wished for something that would help other people.

That's not so surprising...they're only aged from 7 to 14.



But what is also interesting is that the division among wishes was somewhat different in other countries. For example, in Brazil and China the pie charts looked like this.



We then ask them what they would do for the person who granted them this wish.

A lot of children, at any age, say “Thank you” (they’ve been taught to be polite, and that’s good...).



Photo credit: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/8b/9e/6a/8b9e6a4c254df75d03d1262a1e3c2673.jpg>

- ✚ *I would be very thankful and so happy because I always wanted that wish.*
- ✚ *If a person get and give me the cats. I will say thay [thank] you and do good stuff to the cats so I can cep [keep] the cat.*
- ✚ *I would thank them with all my heart and hopefully my happiness would make their day.*

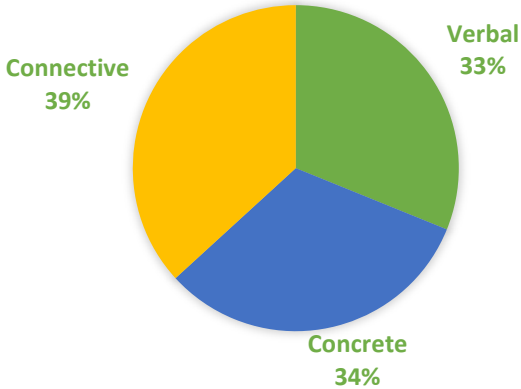
A lot of them think that it would be good to give something back to the person...and that’s starting to get at connective gratitude. The drawback is that what they think about giving back is something that they would like, not what the person would like.

- ✚ *One of my toys.*
- ✚ *I would let this person have all of the sweets in the world.*
- ✚ *I would give them a present and let them be in my first video.*

Some of them really try to think about what the person who granted their wish would like, and offer that.

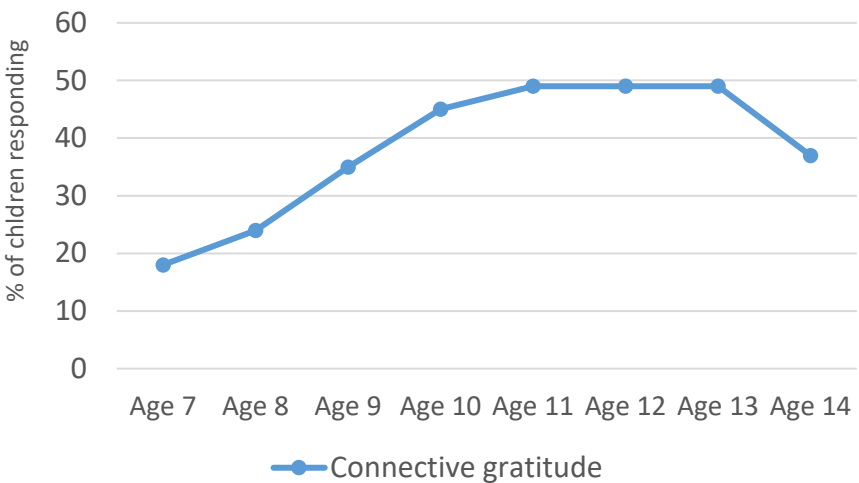
- ✚ *Almost anything they would like. I would always be at their side.*
- ✚ *I would return the favor by getting the something that they had always wish for.*
- ✚ *I would personally do anything for them.*
- ✚ *Make sure that person is well taken care of and has what they need.*

GRATITUDE



The children in Greensboro were slightly more likely to express connective gratitude than either verbal or concrete. Connective gratitude is really good for children, because it's likely to create or strengthen bonds between them and others. But, as you can see, older children are more likely to express this type of gratitude than are the younger children (those aged 7 to 8).

Connective gratitude



Why is it that older children are more likely to express connective gratitude? One reason is that as children get older it's easier for them to think about others.

But it helps if they've heard parents, grandparents, teachers, and friends talking about being grateful to others for what they've done and about what they can do in return.

Many of us encourage our children to say "Thank you." Some of the parents in our study said:

- ✚ *I always ask, "Dulce, did you say, 'Thank you?'" "Yes mom, I did, okay." "Okay, good."*
- ✚ *I give them something and she forget to say "Thank you.", I say "What you say?" and they have to say "thank you" before they receive.*
- ✚ *I try to talk to her and think--I try to get on her level and see how she sees it and try to explain to her and discuss about how I feel. It's a--it's a different situation and you should say, "thank you" when people give you something and you should be appreciative.*

And of course it helps if your children are encouraged to think about others. As other parents said:

- ✚ *I always teach my kids to be grateful about everything, everything your parents do, uhm the things people give them, being grateful for the help he gets at school yeah to be grateful for everything.*
- ✚ *When somebody gets her something but she feel she wants something else and she get--she gets her own little self and I'm like, "You should be thankful they got you something in the first place, because they didn't have to get it for you."*
- ✚ *I think it comes from years of what do you say when somebody does something? What do you do? And then they get gifts on their birthdays and we make them write thank you notes uhm every time and or from you know if someone give them \$20 or something they have to write a note.*

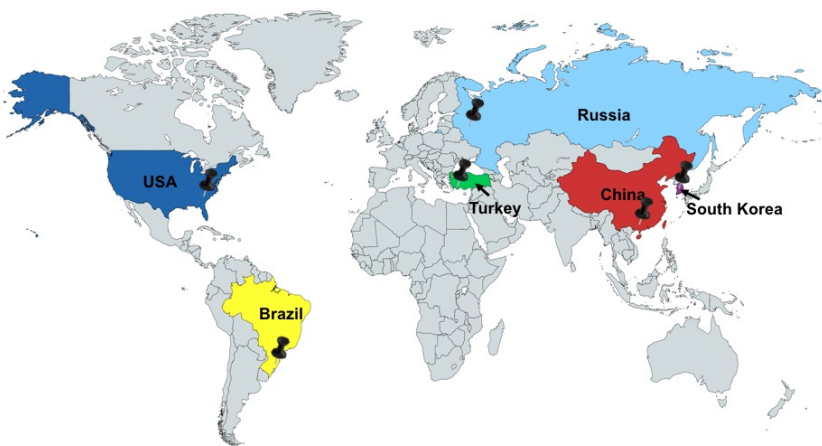
So that's what we've found in Greensboro. But Greensboro isn't the world! So we were interested in knowing whether gratitude developed in similar ways in other parts of the world.

Countries Where we Collected our Information

What countries should we choose? People in the United States are often thought of as individualistic; that is, they want to make their own way in the world, think about what's best for themselves, not worry too much about other people, and so on. By contrast, people in some other countries are often thought of as thinking more about the group, following the ideas of their elders and the traditions of the group, and so on.

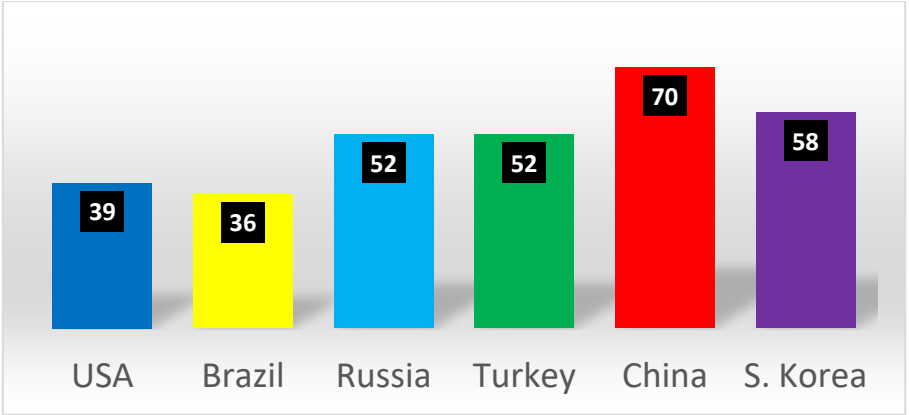
As you've already seen, however, quite a few American children expressed connective gratitude, and so were clearly thinking about others.

Still, we decided to find out about gratitude in other societies that fit into this second group. We chose Brazil, Russia, Turkey, China, and Korea, and asked children in those countries exactly the same questions as we had asked children in Greensboro.

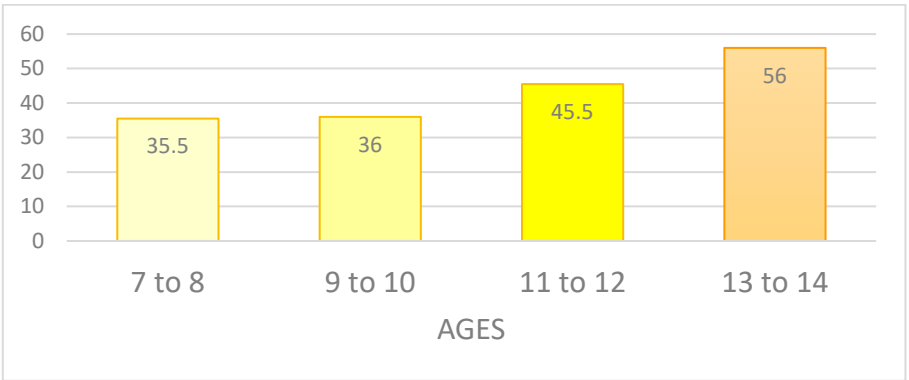


Connective Gratitude by Societies and Age

In the first graph, you can see that different percentages of our 7- to 14-year-olds expressed connective gratitude.



In this next graph, you can see that across all of the societies where we gathered our information, younger children (those aged 7 to 8) were less likely to express connective gratitude (35.5%) than were those aged 13 to 14 (56%).



Benefits of Gratitude

Connective gratitude builds connections between people! Some of our children obviously understood that!

- ✚ *Yeah because...if--'cause if you help them back they'll help you back again and then it'll keep on going on and on and on.*
- ✚ *Always--If somebody helps you with something it's always good to do something in return once they've helped you with something that maybe is hard or something that you might needed. Help others and then give in return is two good things mixed together. If--if you give--if somebody helps you with something you should always be kind enough to do something back for them or a favor.*

Some children are very impressed with material possessions, and think that the way to impress others is to have a lot of them, or at least some that are very expensive. As one child said:

- ✚ *I would like to have a Ferrari.*

When asked how this would make his life better, he replied:

- ✚ *My friend Nick would like me better cause he would see it.*

Other children, who expressed connective gratitude, answered the same questions in a quite different way, and showed themselves to be much less materialistic.

- ✚ *Umm by giv--by giving the uhh your--your mom a gift for Mother's Day, a very special gift. And...ah throwing a big party for their birthday.*
- ✚ *Uhm maybe like being a good swimmer and just being nice to people uhm being not being you know mean.*

My Children Never Seem Grateful for Anything

My children never say “thank you” for anything. What can I do?

- ✓ Always remember to thank them when they do anything for you.
- ✓ Let them know that you feel very happy when they thank you (and that others feel happy as well).
- ✓ Remember that “thank you” may only be politeness—look for, and encourage, signs that they think about what they can do for people who have helped them.
- ✓ A gentle reminder is more effective than getting cross.

My children say “thank you” when given something, but never think about doing anything for anyone else. I’ve talked to them so many times, but it never does any good.

- ✓ Regularly do something nice for those who have helped you, especially when your children can see you doing that; they will learn from your actions.
- ✓ Help your children to think of things they could do for the person. “What do you think he might need? I saw that he was looking for pencils. Do you think he’d like it if you got him some pencils?”

Some people are really poor. What do they have to be grateful for?

- ✓ It’s not a question of how much people have or don’t have—we ALL have people to whom we should be grateful for helping us, doing what they can for us, and so on.
- ✓ Gratitude is not about material things. We can be grateful to people for help or for a kind act.
- ✓ Giving back also doesn’t need to be things. We can do someone a favor or help them when needed.
- ✓ If it seems impossible to give back, pay it forward! If someone has done something to help you and you want to give back but it’s just not possible, try doing something to help another person. It can be an indirect way of giving back to the person who helped you.

My children just feel entitled to everything they get.

- ✓ Remind your children of the efforts of others. For example, if they receive gifts from their grandmother and appear to feel entitled to the gifts rather than grateful to their grandmother, you could remind them that their grandmother spent time and money to get those things for them. You can tell your children that their grandmother didn't have to do that for them. Point out the efforts of the person rather than the value of the things.
- ✓ If your children don't get something they want, remind them of the importance of the people in their life. You might say, "I know you're disappointed that you didn't get the new iPhone for Christmas, but think about how thoughtful your Aunt and Uncle were to get you all these other wonderful things. They really took the time and thought of you!"

My children typically say "thank you" when getting something, but it just seems like good manners—they never seem grateful.

- ✓ It's not "just" good manners—we all want our children to be polite. Be patient, though, and model what you'd like them to feel and do. So, when they do something nice for you, say "thank you," but then, when you're able to reciprocate with something that'll make them happy, remind them why you're doing that—because they did that nice thing for you earlier. In exactly the way that you had to teach them to be polite, now you can help encourage them to become truly grateful.

My children only ever seem to be grateful that they've got more "stuff" than their friends do, and that we live in a nicer house and have a better car than they do.

- ✓ That's difficult, isn't it. Many people seem to think mostly about the things they're grateful FOR rather than the people they're grateful TO. But your children are also helped by other people (including by you)—try encouraging gratitude when this happens. And of course, you can show them when you're grateful to them whenever they help or do something nice. Most of all, try getting them to focus on the people who give them gifts ("That was so nice of Uncle Marcus, don't you think") rather than just on the gift itself.

Gratitude Requires Practice!

How do children become grateful? What YOU do matters! If your children never see real gratitude in action, how would they know what it looks like?

Say “Thank you” to your children when they help you or give you something, but then go on: “That was really nice of you!” or say, to your children, “Wasn’t that nice of Auntie Lia to help you with that?”

But developing gratitude also requires practice. Learning to be grateful is like any skill. Children get better at baseball, or playing a musical instrument, or become better readers by practicing. Don’t expect your children to suddenly become truly grateful—work on it!

Remind your children about the giver and not only the gift!

✚ *When Stephen is given something, I always want him to think about the person who gave it. “Oh, wasn’t that nice of Paul to get you something you wanted” and not just “Oh, isn’t that a nice gift.”*

Ask your children whether it would be nice to do something for that person, or give something back.

✚ *Say a friend has really helped her, like got a book to help with her homework, or took her for a trip somewhere, I say “Letty, wasn’t that nice of her to do that. We should try to do something just as nice for her. Do you know what would make her happy?”*

Encourage your children to think about what that person might want or need.

✚ *When it’s time to go to a friend’s birthday party...I remind her about what that friend had given her, and ask her what her friend would like.*

Paying it Forward

Sometimes we get wonderful things from people or organizations, and there's no obvious way in which we could ever reciprocate. Of course, we can send a "Thank you" letter, and that's nice, but we might want to do more. One thing to think about is "paying it forward," which means helping others out of gratitude for what you had received.

The most obvious example is when somebody holds a door open for you, and then you hold the same door for the next person. Even though you don't help the person who helped you, everyone who is helped feels better.

Here's a great example of this idea of paying it forward:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwAYpLVyeFU>. Or just watch the film "Pay it forward" and you'll see what we mean.

Some parents wrote explicitly about volunteering, as a way in which to help others, and not people who had directly helped them:

- ✚ *That's one way I thought that we could give back, that I could have him volunteer his time in exchange for his uniforms. 'Cause we don't expect anything for free, at least I'm trying to raise them not to expect anything for free.*
- ✚ *I'll try to give back whether it be--umm I will always write letters, uh I'm a huge volunteer, so I feel like giving my time to volunteer is a way to show my--my gratitude towards-- whether it be [School name], whether it be the kids' swim team, whether it be--you know, packing-- you know bunches of food packets up at the church for people in--in different countries who are--who are needy, so I give a lot of my time volunteering.*

Gratitude: It's What's for Dinner!

You don't have to wait for the moment when your children get presents or are helped in some important way—things happen that you have no idea about. Dinner-time or bed-time conversations are a great way to bring up situations in which someone else has made a difference in their lives.

“Oh, did anybody do anything nice for you today?”

“How did that make you feel?”

“What do you think you could do for that person?”

“Did you do anything nice for one of your friends? Why? Did they do anything for you? Would it be nice if they did?”

Ask children about their classmates and peers. If they have a conflict with a peer, encourage them to take the perspective of the other child.

Ask your child “What is your greatest wish? What would you do for the person who granted this wish? Why?”

“Are there any people that you really respect? Why do you respect that person? Do you think you're like that person? How could you be more like that person?”

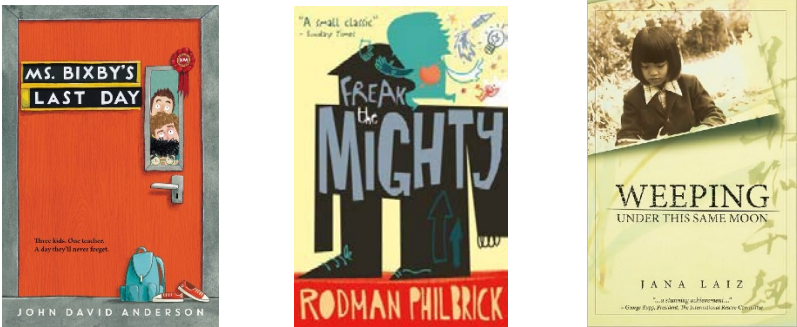


Reading to Raise Grateful Children

Here are some books to get your child started thinking about how to express gratitude in the right way!



And below are some gratitude-related books for adolescents.



The information in this booklet has been provided by members of the Developing Gratitude Research Group. Parents and children from our study provided the quotations we have used throughout the booklet.

We are extremely grateful to all of the children and parents who shared their thoughts and values with us, and to the principals and teachers who allowed us into their schools and classrooms.

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More information can be found at our website:

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