



by Madeline Levine, Ph.D.

Regaining Gratitude This Thanksgiving

November 20, 2012

Ever notice how ironic it is that the holiday that's designed to make us feel serenely grateful for all that we have—our family, our friends, our prosperous life here in the land of turkey and maize and cranberry salad—falls right in the middle of the most hectic, exhausting time of the year?

Think about it. Our kids are burned out from tests and endless pages of homework. One school project follows closely on the heels of another. Sports and other extracurricular events have left all of us exhausted. Meanwhile, Hanukkah and Christmas (with all their economic, social and familial obligations) loom forebodingly on the horizon.

So how can we pause for a day in the midst of all the chaos and stress—not to mention the weird family dynamics that must be navigated over the Thanksgiving table—and just feel *thankful*?

The complete answer to that question could fill a book! (And if you know a good one, I'd love the name of it!) But because parenting is my area of expertise, I will zero in on our (complicated, stressful, worry-filled) relationship with our children.

Twenty-first century parents fret. It's what we do. We wring our hands over our kids' grades, their social development, their performance on the playing field, their future.

Yet it's been proven again and again that all of our overparenting behaviors—our bribes, our threats, our micromanagement, our insistence that kids do more, better, faster—not only don't work, they have the opposite effect. Our frantic efforts to give our kids "an edge" are harming rather than helping them.

And so, based on the knowledge that anxiety and gratitude can't co-exist, let's all just relax and trust the research. By research I mean the reams of solid scientific evidence that proves backing off a little is the best thing we can do for our kids.

Below are 10 resolutions that I originally wrote for the beginning of the school year. In the spirit of Thanksgiving I have repurposed them here. I think they speak to the mindset that keeps us from living in the moment and truly savoring the all-too-short time we really have with our kids.

Ten Resolutions For Becoming a More Grateful Parent:

I will make sure my child gets a full night's sleep. Kids need between nine and 12 hours a night. Sleep deprivation impairs concentration, memory, and the ability to accurately read emotional cues. It makes kids crabby and compromises their ability to learn.

I will remember that I am a parent, not a CEO. Results are down the line, not at the end of the quarter. This means the occasional "B" or "C" will not break your child's future prospects. Stop catastrophizing. You won't see the final fruits of your parenting until your child is grown and gone.

I will remember the success trajectory is a squiggle ... not a straight line. Few of us become successful

by simply putting one foot in front of the other. Most of us encounter a multitude of twists, turns, direction changes, and stops on the way to our goals.

I will love the child in front of me. Appreciate and be thankful for your child's unique gifts. Children are talented in a multitude of different ways. See your child's particular talents clearly.

I will not push my child to be perfect. Besides genetics, perfectionism is the strongest predictor of clinical depression. Life is full of mistakes, imperfect days, and human failings. Kids need to learn how to cope with these inevitabilities. They (and you) need to be able to feel happiness and gratitude in the face of imperfection.

I will not do for my child what he can do for himself. This kills motivation and the ability to innovate. Both are missing from too many young people in today's workforce.

I will not do for my child what she can almost do for herself. At one time your child could almost walk. Now she can walk. Enough said.

I will not confuse my needs with my child's needs. This is the most toxic manifestation of overparenting. Get a hobby or a therapist instead.

I will honor the importance of PDF (Play Time, Down Time and Family Time. Don't overschedule. Kids need time to play, daydream, and just hang out. It's in these precious "between" times that crucial developmental tasks are accomplished.

I will value my own (adult) life. Being a happy, fulfilled, and yes, grateful adult makes you a better parent. It's one of the best gifts you can give your child. It makes adulthood look like something worth striving for.

When we observe Thanksgiving the way I believe we're meant to, we realize that life is truly rich and bountiful. As parents, we've been given life's greatest gift. Learning to appreciate and honor that gift may mean breaking the culturally sanctioned patterns that cause us to unknowingly damage our kids even as we seek to make life better for them.

Overparenting is about anxiously exerting control. Gratitude is about accepting what we've been given and noticing the joy that it brings. This Thanksgiving weekend, let's try to do less of the former and more of the latter. And from here out, let's try to guide and teach our kids without seeking to force them into the mold that we (and society) believe they should conform to. When you can master that balance you will become a perpetually grateful parent.



Comments (0)

Madeline Levine, Ph.D., is a nationally known psychologist with over 25 years of experience as a clinician, consultant, and educator. Her New York Times best-selling book, *The Price of Privilege*, explores the reasons why teenagers from affluent families are experiencing epidemic rates of emotional problems. Her follow-up best-selling book, *Teach Your Children Well*, focuses on expanding our current narrow and shortsighted view of success and providing concrete strategies for parents. Her two previous books, *Viewing Violence* and *See No Evil*, both received critical acclaim. Dr. Levine began her career as an elementary and junior high school teacher in the South Bronx of New York before moving to California and earning her degrees in psychology. She has taught Child Development classes to graduate students at the University of California Medical Center / San Francisco. Dr. Levine lectures extensively to parent, school and business audiences both nationally and internationally.