

Solutions Newsletter

November 2020



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Fostering Gratitude During a Time of Crisis

November signals the arrival of the holiday season, a time that brings mixed emotions for many people even under the best of circumstances. Now, in the midst of a national health emergency that has brought many hardships, it may be more difficult than ever to feel like celebrating, or to muster the sense of gratitude and appreciation that we associate with Thanksgiving. Difficult though it might be, actively fostering gratitude in ourselves and in our children can be a powerful mental health intervention to help us cope with the ongoing stress of the pandemic.

There is a branch of psychology known as "Positive Psychology", and researchers in this field focus on human happiness and well-being rather than on understanding and treating mental illness. These scientists study the relationship between mental health and various human characteristics such as curiosity, open-mindedness, forgiveness, kindness, and humor. One of the most promising of these characteristics from a mental health standpoint is appreciation/gratitude, which is defined as an understanding of the meaning and value of something, and having a positive emotional connection to that something.

There is a large amount of research about the benefits of gratitude. Being grateful is related to increased positive emotions, optimism, life satisfaction, and academic achievement. Grateful people are also more likely to have improved social functioning, and to have less anger, anxiety, depression, materialism, and envy. Happily, there is also research evidence suggesting that some relatively simple actions can quickly foster grateful thoughts and feelings, and thus contribute to improved mental health.

Given how easy it seems to be to increase grateful thoughts, feelings and behaviors in children, parents may want to include a few simple strategies to improve the health and well-being of their children. In particular, parents might challenge children (and themselves!) to identify some unexpected "silver linings" that have appeared as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These might include more time with family, a break from overcommitted and hectic

schedules, time to work on home-based projects, increased skill in managing technology, time to value "being" instead of only "doing", and time to re-assess individual and family goals and priorities. For many, the pandemic has also brought about a greater appreciation for dedicated educators, for school systems that offer much more than the ABC's, and for parents who have been juggling household responsibilities and overseeing their children's education while also trying to earn a living.

Parents can help their children develop gratefulness in a variety of ways:

- Encourage your child (and maybe yourself!) to keep a gratitude journal. Each day write one or two SMALL things that you were grateful for that day: a delicious meal, a compliment from a friend, help with your homework, unexpectedly hearing your favorite song, finding a funny video, etc. Pick a "count your blessings" time each week for family members to share these journal entries with each other.
- Help your child plan and complete a weekly "gratitude activity": e.g., write a detailed "thank you" letter to someone who has helped you in life, then send or read the letter to that person.
- Teach your children how to regularly tell people in their lives that they appreciate them. **BE SPECIFIC!** "Your pep talk today really helped me," "you gave me a great tip about how to throw a football," "your smile makes me happy," "you make delicious brownies."
- Plan family experiences that bring about awe or wonder. For example, watch a documentary about animals, or people who've done great things, or spend time in nature, appreciating and photographing what you see.