

Attitude of Gratitude



by ashley fagerstrom
photos by jana graham photography

It's official. The world has become a smaller place. We learn of the plight of children in far away lands on the morning news, and of a hometown hero's passing through pictures and posts on social media. Why is it then that we find it so challenging to move through life being grateful for what we have? Our own health, fortune and blessings are reflected back to us continuously each day in the warmth of our homes and the heartbeats of our loved ones, but most of us have trouble seeing what our lives are really worth.

Benefits of gratitude

Research has shown that being grateful for what we have can have substantial impacts on our levels of satisfaction and happiness in life. A study conducted at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas explored gratitude and its effect on our health. In short, the results of the study showed that those who practiced daily gratitude were more resilient, had less anxiety and had significantly reduced stress levels.

Gwen Felten, M.A., L.C.P.C., P.C., a psychologist at Northwest Counseling Center in Billings, says, "Cognitions fuel emotions. If you shift to being more grateful for your blessings, you will have more peaceful thoughts. If you are constantly focused on what you don't have, or on getting that next best thing, you will experience a life filled with anxiousness." In Gwen's practice she advises that focusing on what we are thankful for prevents a sense of entitlement, helps our families to develop a sense of humility, and can give life richer meaning.

Attitude of gratitude in action

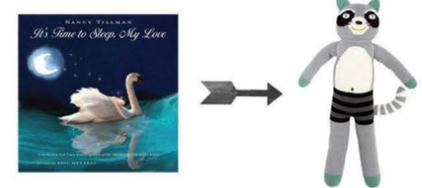
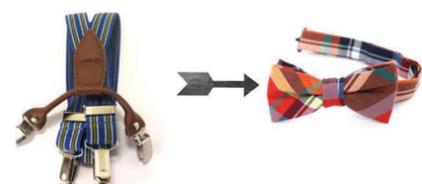
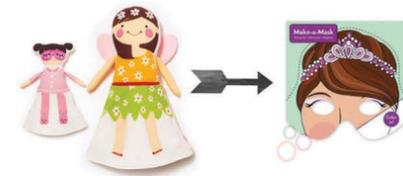
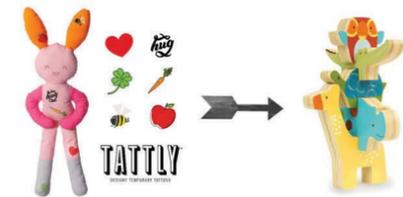
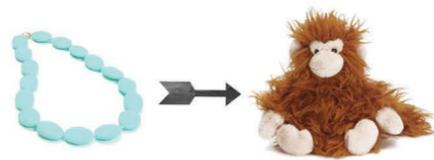
One local family knows this lesson and has imparted it to

their children in a big way. Jason and Stacey Frank, owners of Valet Today Cleaners in Billings, believe that practicing gratitude means focusing on what you have instead of seeking what you don't have. Jason thinks, "If everyone would give a little more than they take, whether it be time, money or anything, the world would be a much better place."

The couple and their children have lent their family business to creating philanthropy within the community by giving back in a myriad of ways. One of those ways is through Valet Today's annual coat drive that has been in existence for over 23 years. Each year from September 15th through November 15th (this year it has been extended to December 15th) the coat drive takes in donations of between three to five thousand coats. Since its inception, the event has collected, cleaned and distributed over 90,000 coats to those in need, given by donors from all over Yellowstone County.

The Frank children are soaking up the family's philosophy and coming up with ways to "pay it forward" all on their own. Two years ago, Skylar, the Frank's thirteen-year-old daughter and her friend Grace came up with the idea to have a shoe drive in August to compliment the coat drive. Last year, the shoe drive put shoes on the feet of over 450 men, women and children in and around Billings.

Stacey believes that giving back is a great way to teach children what is important in life. "On a daily basis, we tell our kids that it's not about them. They should look out for the needs of others and ask what we can do for them instead." Although Stacey and Jason give their children daily reminders of the responsibility of their position, the Franks are not necessarily comfortable talking about their efforts to give back publicly. "We know that when a business comes out and talks about the work they do in the community, it lends validity to the work being done



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and that's why we are open about it," says Stacey.

Practicing gratitude can be tough

Practicing gratitude through service is a concept that many of us may be familiar with; however, educating children about gratitude can be a bit abstract. Finding ways to teach your children about appreciation and giving back in a manner that is appropriate for their age can be as simple as modeling the behavior for them. Tawny Stark, L.C.P.C., L.A.C., a Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counselor at Reflections Counseling in Billings, says, "Having gratitude in life brings more personal satisfaction. Outwardly expressing gratitude for the little things in life is the first part

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of teaching young kids the behavior. Regardless of age, if gratefulness is not modeled for them, they won't know how to do it. It is really important that they actually see it happening in their own home." In short, no matter how parents may try to skirt around it, the old saying, "Do what I say, not what I do" isn't going to fly.

As many people experience, the practice of gratitude sounds easy in theory, but can be more difficult to implement in daily life. Coming up with things that are weighing us down or burdening our hearts seems to be a pattern of behavior that many people default to. The correlation between positive or negative thinking and outlook on life is undeniable. We all travel the world on different paths; we have some shared experiences, but never a shared reality. Like beauty, gratitude lies in the eye of the beholder. Imagine for a moment that you have lost some of the things that are most dear to you in life: your ability to see or to walk, the roof over your head or your best friend. Then imagine individually what it would be like to have each one of these things returned to you. How would that feel?

Don't let gratitude simply be defined by getting what you want, but strive to look for the power present in each day.

Finding perspective in life can lead to making the invisible, visible. Finding joy in the smallest things each day—like the gift of the sparkle in the snow, man's best friend curled up beside you, the pair of fuzzy socks your mom gave you for Christmas last year, your dearest friend, or the sound of your favorite voice over the phone—allows life's blessings to bloom in your heart. These experiences are what life is all about. Connecting to and finding worth in the things that are bigger than ourselves helps us to reach our highest good and potential for joy. Don't let gratitude simply be defined by getting what you want, but strive to look for the power present in each day. German philosopher, theologian and spiritualist, Meister Eckhart said it best "If the only prayer you say in life is 'thank you,' that would suffice." [sfm](#)

Ashley is a Billings, MT native and graduate of MSU-B. After living and traveling abroad she returned to Montana to rediscover her roots. Over the years, Ashley has worked in fundraising for various local nonprofit organizations and as a freelance writer, compelled to be a voice of support for the community.

Four Ways to Practice Gratitude as a Family

1. This suggestion is just for you. Start your day by taking a few deep breaths each morning. Imagine the people and things that are gifts in your life. Then think about setting an intention for your day. It can be something as small as choosing to be especially determined in your work, or to not sweat the small stuff just for one day. Finding ease within yourself and the day ahead will set the tone for the rest of your family, all before they have even gotten out of bed.

2. Enlist the whole family at mealtime. Whether it is every morning at breakfast or during family supper, have each person think of one thing they are appreciative of that day. Have a special post-it pad and marker you can pass around and ask everyone to write down their idea. Displaying the notes at eye-level on the refrigerator helps keep these thoughts present throughout the day.

3. Write a pumped-up version of the thank you note. Have each member of your family compose a message to someone they are grateful for. The letter can be a spontaneous show of appreciation and affection; helping your children to practice thankfulness while bringing joy to someone they care about.

4. Expose yourself and your family to what is happening in your community. Find a way to get out and help others. Ask your children to play philanthropist by having them make a presentation for the rest of the family, educating the group regarding which local causes are important to them. Reversing the roles of speaker and audience or teacher and student can engage all of your family members individually. Then have your family choose which causes interest the group as a whole, and dedicate time together to visit and donate your service to the chosen charity or organization. Volunteerism can expose your family to the challenges many people face and can help children discover a sense of responsibility toward their community, planting the seed for a grateful adulthood.



The Frank children sorting through coat and shoe donations

Valet Today Cleaners ANNUAL COAT DRIVE runs through December 15.

Drop off gently used children's and adult coats at any Valet Today Cleaners location.

ANNUAL SHOE DRIVE takes place in August, check with Valet Today Cleaners for more details.

Shopping for Myrtle Leaf Skin Care made easy

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