

## The Benefits of Practicing Gratitude

Practicing gratitude has numerous benefits for both physical and mental well-being. Neuroscience research has shown that expressing gratitude activates areas of the brain involved in reward, which plays a role in the regulation of emotions and behavior (National Institute of Health). When we practice gratitude, our brains release dopamine and serotonin, which increase our feelings of happiness and contentment. While this is helpful for people of all ages, it is especially impactful for kids and teens because their brains are still growing and developing. When youth practice gratitude consistently, it reinforces these positive neural responses, promoting a long-term sense of wellbeing.

In addition to increased happiness, practicing gratitude offers youth numerous benefits, including:

- **Reduced negative feelings:** Research has found that youth who engage in regular gratitude exercises reported higher levels of life satisfaction and optimism, along with lower levels of stress and depressive symptoms (The Journal of Positive Psychology).
- **Improved coping skills:** Gratitude builds emotional resilience, enabling youth to handle stress and adversity more effectively.
- **Increased self-esteem:** Focusing on the positive aspects of life can lead to a boost in self-esteem.
- **Stronger relationships:** By helping youth recognize the kindness and support of others, gratitude strengthens relationships with family and friends.
- **Increased compassion:** Practicing gratitude can increase empathy and sensitivity toward others.
- **Reduced aggression:** Grateful individuals are less likely to show aggression or retaliate when faced with negative behaviors.
- **Better sleep:** Positive thoughts, including those related to gratitude, can lead to longer and better-quality sleep.
- **Boosted immunity:** Gratitude is associated with a stronger immune system, possibly due to improved sleep and overall happiness.

Adults can play an important role in helping youth to practice gratitude. In fact, research shows that when parents/caregivers are more grateful, their children often express more gratitude (Anxiety and Depression Association of America). To teach youth gratitude, start by modeling it. For example, express thanks for everyday things in your own life such as a healthy meal or someone's kindness. Below are other strategies adults can use to teach youth the art of gratitude:

- **Point out generosity:** When you see others being kind, point it out to youth to encourage them to notice it too.

- **Start a gratitude routine:** Establish a regular practice of gratitude through bedtime reflections or making gratitude part of meal routines.
- **Keep a gratitude journal or jar:** Have youth write or draw things they are thankful for in a journal or on small notes to put in a jar.
- **Use thank you notes:** Teach the importance of expressing thanks by having youth write and deliver thank you notes for gifts or help.
- **Encourage and engage in acts of kindness:** Volunteer to help others or help your child sort and donate items to foster a sense of gratitude for what they have.
- **Focus on experiences:** Help youth appreciate non-material things like time spent with family or a sunny day.
- **Practice mindfulness:** Encourage being present in the moment to better appreciate the current one.

Consistently practicing gratitude can help youth develop a resilient and optimistic outlook that can benefit them throughout their lifetime. By incorporating small gratitude habits into daily routines, adults can create supportive environments that encourage kids to recognize and appreciate positive aspects of their lives. The month of November is a great time to start practicing gratitude!

References: Anxiety and Depression Association of America; Harvard Health; National Institute of Health; The Journal of Positive Psychology