

Giving Goes Beyond Thanksgiving

How to Teach Your Children to Be that Spark Every Day

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By Chris Parsons, Author of A Little Spark



As the fall season commences, many of us are entering a season of “super thankfulness.” Obviously, we should teach our children to be thankful all year long, but it’s so much easier during the holiday season. And besides a time of thankfulness, the holidays are a perfect time to teach our children how they can be a blessing to others – how they can “Be That Spark” every day. Here are a few ideas to teach those lessons to your children this harvest season. I hope you’ll take these lessons and stretch them out to last all year long. After all, Giving Goes Beyond Thanksgiving!

Start by reminding your children that even the smallest among them can make a big difference in the world. Children doing good deeds is one of the most heartwarming things you’ll ever see, so why not encourage your children to be that spark for the people around them? But keep in mind that children will often get cold feet when push comes to shove, so practice with them in advance of the “big day.” Do some role-playing with them, going over the different experiences they might encounter while doing their good deeds.

In the book *A Little Spark*, Spark risked his life to help his town. We don’t necessarily need to go that far (although some of us might do that someday), but we can take risks. These risks might be big things or small things. And what’s big to one person will be nothing major to someone else. For example, a child (especially a teen) might need to risk their popularity among their peers in order to keep their reputation unblemished and do what they think is right.

This idea came from an 8-year-old girl. She says that caring for other people is a great way to Be That Spark, and I have to agree! Little things can make a big difference in the lives of other people, especially people who may not see those “little sparks” very often – older people, kids who don’t have many friends, etc. Teach your kids to do one good thing each day. These can be bigger things like taking the time to write and send a letter to a friend, calling a family member you haven’t seen or spoken to in a long time (especially appropriate in the age of COVID), helping your parent to make dinner, or helping friends and siblings with their homework. Or it could be something as small as smiling at a stranger in the grocery store or holding the door for someone as you enter or leave a restaurant.

What’s most important, though, is to make sure kids understand that each one of them can Be That Spark in whatever environment they are in. And they don’t (always) need a grownup to tell them to do something kind – they can do it all on their own.

There have been many studies over the years about different types of gratitude. I’m not going to get overly deep in this article, but I do want to focus on two of the main types: concrete and connective.

The best way to teach these lessons is by practicing them ourselves. Parents, if you are not regularly increasing your own positive emotions through the practice of fully appreciating, how can possibly expect your kids to begin? Monkey see, monkey do, after all. Within this, though, keep in mind the age and emotional level of your children. A 2-year-old won’t have the same way of showing gratitude as an 8-year-old. In the earlier years, focus on concrete gratitude. This is what is commonly known as “manners” – an automatic statement of “Thank you” when something is received. When spoken by a child to an adult, these simple words often make the

giver feel like they've been given a gift all their own, and it's so easy for a child to give a statement of gratitude.

As children age and mature, they should begin to show connective gratitude. This is a fully understood and appreciated receipt of whatever has been given. The appreciation is returned in a meaningful and heartfelt way, benefiting both receiver and giver. This simply means that there is a repayment of some sort. This can be an actual repayment of something of value, or the giving of sincere feelings – becoming (or staying) close friends.

For [gratitude to be an effective way to increase happiness](#), it must be felt, and connective gratitude is the key.

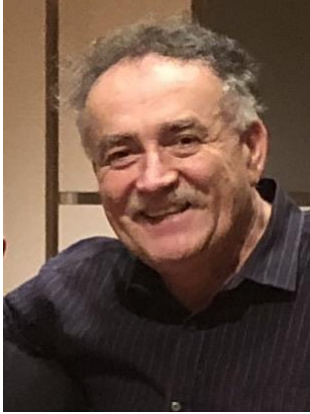
Teaching kids about gratitude is an important job. Start by asking what they know about the subject. Once you understand what your kids know, it will be easier to find a starting point on the instruction. Children's understanding of positive emotions can be a challenging conversation, as they are abstract and subjective. Gratitude is about focusing on what is good in our lives. Being thankful for all the things we already have is a daily practice.

Showing a child gratitude in practice is the most powerful way to reinforce the definition. When your child does something for you (even if you may not truly appreciate it – hello, dandelion bouquets!), show true gratitude. While the gift may not be something you adore, the mindset behind it is.

Take the time to demonstrate what it means to pause and appreciate the things we take for granted. Reveal what it is to be fully aware of your own blessings. Help them imagine what it would be like to live without things we deem necessary in the modern world: running water, electricity, Wi-Fi.

Developing an awareness of what is good is simple enough when you give this perspective often. Clean water, refrigeration, and a roof over our heads are all things not provided to all humans and can be appreciated more when the focus is on blessings. Modeling daily gratitude with consistency will instill an understanding that gratitude is a positive emotion that can be cultivated. And isn't that what we all want for our children?

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Chris Parsons, Author of *A Little Spark*

Chris Parsons grew up in the small fishing village of Flatrock, Newfoundland where he was surrounded by storytellers. When he became a father, he began creating his own children's stories, and soon he was sharing them with a wider audience. Over time, his audience grew up, but he continued to create his stories and colorful characters mostly for his own enjoyment. Today, Chris lives in Dallas where, together with his wife, Kathleen, daughter, Maggie and son, Kealan, they share a love for all of God's creatures. *A Little Spark* is his first book. For more information, please visit bethatspark.com.