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Gratitude and Giving

By Barbara Kohm

Every problem contains a kernel of opportunity. Success in parenting and teaching, as in many other endeavors in life, often lies in finding that kernel. Most of us are facing this holiday season with less expendable income than in former years. This may mean we can't buy our children all the material gifts the media is touting or their friends are acquiring. There are two gifts, however we can give our children that cost next-to-nothing and are more valuable in the long run than the material things that seem so important to them in the moment. They are *gratitude* and *giving*. Two character traits that are often missing in our fast-paced, consumer-oriented world.

Americans often give a nod to *gratitude* on Thanksgiving and then quickly forget it in the winter holiday rush. This year make it a year-round gift. A number of studies list *gratitude* as an essential characteristic of happy people. Years ago, I read a book by a young man who had taught in both inner city and suburban schools. He thought each group suffered from a kind of poverty. Inner city children sometimes lacked the kind of intellectual experiences that prepared them for school. Many suburban children had an overdeveloped sense of entitlement and an underdeveloped sense of *gratitude*. He believed both groups benefited from a focus on what they had rather than what they lacked.

This holiday season begin at school or in your family. Have children make or buy cards to give to family members and/or teachers thanking them for the things they do for the child or character traits the child admires. I can't think of a teacher or grandmother who wouldn't be thrilled with such a gift. It has double value because it's a gift to the recipient and a gift to the giver as well. It forces a child to think about his relationships with important people in his life, and to appreciate what they do for him. In the process the child's self-esteem and optimism rise and character deepens.

Once your family starts focusing on what you already have, you'll find many opportunities for you and your children to express *gratitude*. Thank your children for what they do and who they are and help them find ways to notice the caring people and good things in their lives. Then help them express their gratitude. Teachers might think

about having students write letters of gratitude to their parents as holiday gifts. They may also consider notes to other school personnel (secretaries, custodians, counselors, specialists, administrators) who contribute to a positive school climate.

The second gift is *giving*. The best gift-givers are those who pay careful attention to other people and notice what would make them happy. Often the best gifts cost little or no money. When our children were growing up, we picked names at Christmas and each person bought one gift. This included adults who had more money to spend on gifts and young children who very little. That was over 25 years ago and we've all forgotten the gifts we gave and received. All accept one.

My niece, who was about five year-old at the time, got my father's name. Her mother suggested that while visiting Grandpa she look around and notice what he might like. Anna noticed that every time he needed to blow his nose he had to get up from his desk and go to the bathroom for a tissue.

She bought Grandpa a box of Kleenex for his desk....a gift that was well within her budget and responded to his need. She was very proud of herself and of course Grandpa was thrilled. Most important, she learned something about paying attention to other people and tuning into their needs.

Ask your child to notice what people on their gift list might like and encourage them to make a gift or provide a service (shovel snow, walk the dog, drive Grandma to the store). They'll learn that the best gift-givers are those who focus on other people and give of themselves.

Exploit the kernel of opportunity in what otherwise may be a difficult holiday season. Give your children the gifts of *gratitude* and *giving*. They cost less, build character, and have greater value than most material gifts.

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