Getting Joy from Gratitude

Have you ever walked through the store with your children and intentionally avoided the toy section because you know that all you will hear is “can I get that?” Sometimes it seems like all children know how to do is ask for stuff, especially after you just bought them something else. Wouldn’t it be nice if just once they could be grateful for what they have? The great news is that gratitude is a skill and it can be developed, it just takes practice.

We sometimes get stuck in a rut where all we focus on is what we don’t have and we believe that if we could just get it we would be happier. The world of marketing is great at perpetuating this idea, that we need to buy their product and then we will be happy. Unfortunately children are easy targets of this. They see all the “joy” a child has in the commercial or on the box and they think that if they had the item, then they would have the same joy.

Here is the problem, we don’t get joy from having things, joy comes from gratitude. You might be wondering “what’s the difference?” Here it is, you can have gratitude without having the things but you can’t have joy from any specific thing. The joy comes when you have gratitude for the thing. For example, a child might have a ball, but the ball itself isn’t the joy, it’s in the gratitude the child has for the ball. Another way to think about it, what if you got a speeding ticket, there’s no joy in that because you aren’t grateful for the speeding ticket. Where we find gratitude is where we find joy.

So here is where the skill comes in, you can practice gratitude for anything. Now I’m not saying you need to be grateful for horrible things that happen, but find something that did go well or some time when someone helped you. In Brene Brown’s research on shame and joy, she found that people who had joy in life practiced gratitude daily. They made an effort to name something each day that they were grateful for. This act of noticing and valuing what you have or what has happened, increases your joy and happiness.

As we practice gratitude we start to increase our joy. And even better, we start to have more gratitude. See here is the other thing, what you focus on you get more of. It’s like when you play a sport and they say keep your eye on the prize, or like when you ride your bike and where you look is where you go. What you focus on you get more of. So when you focus on the things that went well or where people were kind to you, you start to see those more and you get more joy.

As we enter a month where the focus is on giving thanks for what we have, practicing gratitude is at its core. As we learn to find gratitude in the small or everyday events, we will start to find our joy. By embracing this as adults, we can model to our children where real joy comes from and how we don’t always need what the marketing gurus tell us. And on top of all that, there are tons of benefits to your health when you are grateful.

Here are some fun ways to practice gratitude:

Have a gratitude jar where children write down something they were thankful for that day.

When you are driving in the car, go through the alphabet and for each letter say something you are grateful for.

Write a family grateful book with each person having a page to write or draw.
Each week, write a thank you note to someone who did something you were grateful for.

Have a dry erase board in the entry or kitchen and take turns writing something the family is grateful for.

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