

CULTIVATING AN ATTITUDE OF THANKFULNESS AND GRATITUDE

Tracy Seed



What is gratitude and what are the benefits of fostering this attitude in children?

A free expression of gratitude is born out of a loving connection and grows from children feeling understood and an appreciation for when someone has been kind or helpful to them.

"One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child." Carl Jung¹

I observed an incident while in Greece this summer that touched me deeply. I was in a restaurant, eating lunch when two young children (refugees) entered. They looked tired and their clothes were dirty. The waitress told them to leave. On their way out of the restaurant, a lady gave them some money and they ran to the food counter. Their faces lit up as soon as they received their chips, and with food in their hands and their mouths full, they turned to us all and shouted, thank you, thank you.

When we are genuinely thankful to others for meeting our needs, an honest and open feeling of gratitude naturally emerges. This isn't the same as expressing thanks out of a sense of obligation and duty; fear of punishment, or hope of a reward. The benefits of free expression are so much greater than this.

I'm reminded of one Sunday afternoon when my aunt Margaret visited our house. I was about 10 years old. I felt excitement rise in my chest as she handed me a soft package wrapped in brown paper. I carefully peeled back the sticky tape that held the edges of the small package together, uncovering a blue cotton dress, covered in bright yellow daisies - my heart sank! Swallowing my tears, with eyes lowered, I said thank you. *Was I honestly thankful in this moment, did I feel grateful?* Absolutely not! I didn't like the dress and never wanted to wear it. My overwhelming feeling was of disappointment and I didn't want to upset my aunt, so I didn't show

this, at least I don't think I did! I had already learnt how to be polite irrespective of how I was feeling. Inside a heavy weight lay in the pit of my stomach.

An inner conflict can easily emerge in situations like this and it can be difficult to resolve without adult support. Fortunately, my conflict was resolved when I was able to share my upset and concerns with my mum. She recognized my need for beauty as well as wanting to be kind to my aunt!

It is of primary importance that the focus of education is concerned with the heart as well as the mind. When relationships are rooted in compassion, children have the potential to develop emotional regulation, empathic communication, conflict resolution skills and an inner resilience for maintaining authenticity.

When we focus on supporting children's freedom to choose - to express their ideas, desires, likes, dislikes, worries and concerns - we nourish the free flow of their natural emotional responses to situations in life. Using statements such as must and should and ought to may be well intentioned but at the same time can block appreciation and an expression of gratitude, which is cultivated in environments that strengthen children through acceptance and love. Rudolf Steiner writes: *"An honest, entirely open feeling of gratitude must be developed, so that children experience it for everything received."*²

The power of love

Many philosophers and spiritual teachers speak about the power of love. We now have extensive scientific evidence about the impact of warm and responsive relationships on our biology and the architecture of the brain.

The earliest years of life are crucial for establishing inner regulation and positive wellbeing, creating a strong base and ease in pathways that advance us emotionally in later years. The good news is that if well established pathways were not established when children were young, it is possible to unlock the brain's plasticity for change to occur throughout life.

In his book, *The Upward Spiral*, Alex Korb, a neuroscience researcher at UCLA, writes extensively about the benefits of rewiring the brain for wellbeing and happiness in adults. It simply takes a commitment to heart-opening practice. One finding is that simply thinking about *what we are grateful for* helps us to feel happier and more positive about life!

How might we cultivate an attitude of gratitude within ourselves and share this with our colleagues and the children? Here are a few suggestions:

Appreciate nature and all of life

Take time to look up at the sky and breathe the air, smell flowers and see the beauty of the natural world. Notice the spider weaving its web in the corner of your house, listen to the sound of the morning chorus, watch the sunrise on the horizon, enjoy the smell of the grass, full of the early morning dew. Search for ladybirds and seek out butterflies, play with puppies!

*"Exposure to nature not only makes you feel better emotionally, it contributes to your physical wellbeing, reducing blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and the production of stress hormones. It may even reduce mortality, according to scientists such as public health researchers Stamatakis and Mitchell."*³

Affective connection through the senses

Watch; babies, a mother gently stroking the hair of her child, an elderly man sitting on a bench chatting with his friend the children as they enter your classroom and run around in the garden outside. Give full attention to each person, without barriers to connection. Express warmth through eyes and the sensitive gentle touch of the arm or shoulder of another - *20 years of research has led to the conclusion that nonverbal contact definitely affects people's behavior*⁴ - include activities in the classroom that involve care through respectful contact.



Find something positive in what you might experience as a negative situation

Maybe you receive a complaint from a parent of a child in your class. She says she didn't like the way you spoke to her child who came home upset. Be curious about this meeting and consider it as an opportunity for connection and learning. View conflicts between children as an opportunity for them to understand each other. Foster resolution through dialogue and a commitment to everyone's values being considered.

Enhancing the expression of appreciation and receiving this from others.

Instead of saying "thank you; you're brilliant; wonderful", tell your colleagues and the children what it is they did that was wonderful for you.

Let them know how this blessed your life and how you felt. And, when others say "thank you" to you, be curious about what it was that you did to enrich their experience of life. Bathe fully in the experience of giving and receiving and take time to connect to all the needs that are being met within you as you receive this. Take time with children to appreciate the experiences they enjoy.

Embrace mourning - find the hidden treasure in memories of connection

It can be difficult to share our sadness and losses. People separate, divorce, a relative or pet dies, a friend moves away, a child leaves the school. Losses can be so painful, difficult to comprehend and to speak about. Acknowledging that grief is part of life and giving space to this within your classroom is essential too. When authentic heartfelt connections blossom between students and teachers, empathy works its magic.

Develop an outlook of gratitude by capturing the blessings of creation

Keep a gratitude journal.

Set aside a few moments each day to remember at least 5 things you are grateful for. Write them in a journal or share them with another person.

If it's difficult to think of things to begin with, you can start simply by being thankful for waking up, having some food to eat, water to drink, a bed to sleep in, a family, friends, your health. When you spend time feeling how incredibly blessed you are, you will discover that this attitude begins to impact the rest of your day and over time this practice becomes habit. You will find that you are able to "catch" the blessings as they occur and it will become a living practice that brings you immense joy.

Share these practices with children in ways that are developmentally appropriate, natural and engaging. Hold gratitude-sharing circles, build a gratitude tree on the wall - children can write their own celebrations on leaves and place them on the branches. Sing gratitude songs using universal gestures, to express self-connection and giving and receiving from the heart.

According to the *HeartMath* institute, the heart emanates an electromagnetic field, fuelled by emotion that radiates and can be measured several feet away from the body. Gratitude is a feeling that expands the heart.

What are some other practices and learning that you can adopt?

1. Take time to transform your self-defeating beliefs into self-compassion and your labels and judgments into empathic connection with the other.

2. Give prime importance to connection in relationships above behaviour modification.
3. Trust in the innate intention of human beings to want to contribute to each other's wellbeing.
4. See problems and conflicts as an opportunity for learning and development.
5. Learn the language of the heart – hear the needs and values being expressed in situations.

My wish is that you and your colleagues work together to create a culture of thankfulness and gratitude between you that permeates the heart and soul of the community. *"For this feeling of gratitude is a bridge from one human soul and heart to another, without gratitude, this bridge could never be built."*⁵

References:

- 1 ***The Development of Personality:*** Collected Works of C.G. Jung page 144 – published Routledge
- 2 ***Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy 2.*** Twelve Public Lectures, Volume 2 By Rudolf Steiner
- 3 <http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/enhance-your-wellbeing/environment/nature-and-us/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing>
- 4 ***Nonverbal encouragement of participation in a course: the effect of touching.*** NICOLAS GUÉGUEN

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5 ***Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy 2:*** Twelve Public Lectures - Volume 2 By Rudolf Steiner.



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Tracy leads a variety of courses and practice groups in UK and internationally. She facilitates a mindful communication/NVC practice in London and offers a series of on-line webinars. She offers team workshops, trainings focused on EYFS areas and a Journey into Leadership training for those working in education settings. You can read more about Tracy and what she offers at

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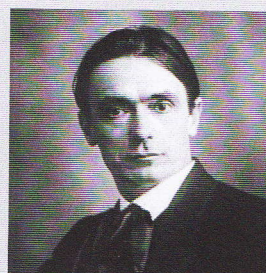


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An immense enrichment of the soul is achieved through the experience of this feeling of gratitude.

Rudolf Steiner (Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy 2: Public Lectures 1922-24. Anthroposophic Press, 1996.)

We should be grateful to people if they treat us badly, because then we can exercise our tolerating forces. We should try to love these people anyway, and we'll then notice that this is the right thing to do.

GA 266 – From the Contents of Esoteric Classes, Part II – Munich, 10th January 1912