

# The Globe and Mail

## How to raise a grateful child

All my son wants from Santa is Pokemon cards – which is ironic, because he has dozens strewn around the house. His desire for more cards is unquenchable: He’s even asked for more after we left the toy store with new ones.

I’ve wondered if there’s a trick to fostering gratitude. After all, researchers have linked materialism to a number of troubling issues.

“[What] we know pretty solidly from the children, adolescent and adult literature is that the more materialistic people are, the lower their personal well-being,” says Tim Kasser, a professor of psychology at Knox College in Illinois, and author of *The High Price of Materialism*. That diminished sense of well-being includes everything from lower life satisfaction and happiness and an increased likelihood of depression and anxiety.

It turns out there may be a simple way to make children less materialistic and more grateful for what they have.

In a study published earlier this year in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, Lan Chaplin, an associate professor of marketing at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and her colleagues used questionnaires to measure the materialism and gratitude of 61 young people between the ages of 11 and 17. The adolescents were then divided into two groups. One group was told to record their daily activities in a journal for two weeks. The other was told to write about who and what they were thankful for in a gratitude journal for the same time period.

The results were striking, Chaplin says. There was no change in the levels of materialism and gratitude among the children who simply wrote about their daily activities, while those who kept a gratitude journal saw a significant decrease in their materialism and increase in thankfulness.

Just how much this can affect a child’s behaviour can be seen in another aspect of the study. After handing in their journals, the kids were given 10 \$1 bills and told they could keep the money or donate some or all of it to charity. Those who kept a gratitude journal gave more than two-thirds of their money to charity, while those who only recorded their daily activities kept more than half of it.

“It appears to show that if children are encouraged to think about who and what they have in their life they’ll see that they actually have a lot to be thankful for. And when it’s present in their minds that they actually have a lot of people and things to be thankful for, they are more likely to understand that other people may not have as much as they do and maybe they should share some of the things that they have,” Chaplin says.

Previous research has shown there is an inverse relationship between materialism and so-called pro-social values such as generosity, Kasser says.

“The more that you tend to prioritize materialistic values, the less you tend to prioritize what we call intrinsic values for things like personal growth and affiliation and community,” he says.

But as Chaplin’s study shows, the opposite is also true: The more that adolescents are encouraged to think about the things and people they are grateful for, the less materialistic they will be.

It’s an important lesson, especially at this time of year, when writing long gift wish lists is all some kids seem able to think about.

“There’s increasing concern from parents and other constituents that children are just becoming more and more materialistic, and as they become more materialistic, it’s hard to keep them happy if you don’t keep replenishing their supply of gadgets and toys and clothes,” Chaplin says.

That’s certainly true in my case, but another study conducted by researchers at the University of Toledo and published last year in the journal *Infant Behaviour and Development* suggests that more toys won’t make your kids happier, particularly when it comes to younger children.

Kids in the study who were given fewer toys played with them longer and in more creative ways. Children who were presented with an abundance of toys got bored of each one quickly and moved on to the next. Sound familiar?

This isn’t to say parents shouldn’t buy their children presents over the holidays.

But we can help them be much better off if we get them to think about all they have to be thankful for. That doesn’t necessarily mean having to keep a gratitude journal. You could spend a few minutes in the car or around the dinner table talking about what makes them grateful, Chaplin says.

“If we all think about who and what we’re thankful for, then what are we doing? We’re focusing on what we have right now as opposed to yearning for what’s not there,” Chaplin says. “It’s a very simple thing.”

*Live your best. We have a daily Life & Arts newsletter, providing you with our latest stories on health, travel, food and culture. [Sign up today.](#)*