Ways to foster an attitude of gratitude

by Jane Clifford

Kids love opening birthday and holiday gifts, but they don't always think about thanking the giver. We asked readers how to get that message across, and what is more appropriate - a formal note, a phone call, an e-mail? Or will the face-to-face thanks suffice?

From Charlotte Gerry, San Diego:

GRATITUDE ATTITUDE - Some people believe that a child's reaction is thanks enough for a gift and these days a written thank-you note is unnecessary. CNS Photo by Kendra Helmer.When I do not receive a thank-you or an acknowledgment for a gift, on the next occasion, I send a donation to my favorite charity in that person's name. The charity then acknowledges to that person the gift received from me in the person's name. The charity thanks me for the donation. Thereby,I have done some good, gotten a thank-you for it, and perhaps taught a lesson.

From Dave Brumley, San Diego:

If you give a gift to a child, the gift is for the child, not for you. From a 3-year-old, you should expect nothing in return, not even thanks. If you're expecting something in return, my advice is not to give the gift. Instead, you should spend some time on self-reflection about your own generosity.

One thing I definitely learned from being a father is that you can't teach children through persuasion or manipulation. Children learn by example. If you want your children to learn to say thank you for gifts they receive, your task as a parent is easy. Simply set a good example.

I don't think the medium of thank-you (formal letter, phone call, e-mail,etc.) makes any difference whatsoever.

From Tonya Lehman of La Mesa, Calif.:

How many times have you had friends over for dinner, treated someone to lunch, or given a birthday gift and never received a thank-you note? The gift or meal or whatever took thought and effort. We must respond with thought and effort, and write a gracious and specific note of thanks.

We all lead busy lives. It takes time to sit down and work with children as they write their notes. But it is important. Sending someone a physical note, something they can read over and over, reminds that person that they are important, special and cared for.

Do my kids look forward to writing thank-you notes? No. But they know it is expected of them, and they enjoy the thank-yous they get in response to gifts for others.

From Melinda Haldeman, San Diego:

At Christmas every year, we've sent our five nephews gifts. We rarely receive a thank-you from any of them, unless we see them and they mention it or we ask if they received it. We have continued to send them gifts, because we enjoy giving. However, as they grow older, our patience is wearing thin. We have had to cross the older ones off our list.

As parents, we discovered that the way to achieve the mind-set of gratitude is to begin teaching children when they're young. So we'd habitually ask after birthdays or Christmas, "Have you written your thank-you notes yet?" The habit of thankfulness expands like a ripple on water to other areas of their lives.

From Beth Dugan of San Diego:

A note lets me know my gift has been received rather than lost in the mail if the child lives far away, but a telephone call is very special, too. As a grandmother, I have appreciated my own daughters' commitment to teaching their children (and husbands) to say thank you. From those close by, a note sent is training for the child to see and learn to think beyond self. However, a personal word of thanks and especially a hug are good enough.

From Lois Fong-Sakai, Poway, Calif.:

We have always insisted that our now-14-year-old daughter send formal thank-you notes to the giver. Our house rule is that recipients must write, address, stamp and send handwritten thank-you notes prior to beingable to wear, use, play with or otherwise enjoy any gifts. Needless to say, she has become very prompt in taking care of thank-you notes without too much parental nagging.

From Laura Alcorn of Poway, Calif.:

One of the first things I "encourage" my children to do as soon as possible after holiday or birthday gifts is write a formal thank-you note. Frequently, this is a family member or good friend who has already watched my son open his gift and already heard a face-to-face "Thank you." It's all about acknowledging that another person took the time to do something for you - and that should always be recognized. I don't believe thate-mail thank-yous suffice. E-mail in general is less personal. I think it makes a difference to receive a written thank-you in the mail.

From Sandy White of Escondido, Calif.:

Because all our family members live far away, I photograph my kids with the gifts they receive for Christmas and birthdays. I then send a short e-mail "thank you," with the photo attached, to the gift-giver to see firsthand how much joy the gift brought.

Likewise, when my children receive gifts from their friends at birthday parties, we take a photograph and slip it into the envelope with a short, handwritten thank-you note.

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