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Time

Lessons On Teaching Children Gratitude

Joan Indiana Rigdon, 07.30.09, 1:30 PM ET

I grew up with no money and a very part-time father. I spent my earliest years in housing projects, and then had to live with babysitters and my aunt until first grade so my mother could work. My older brother got to live at home, but he had to sleep alone in our apartment at night while my mother worked the graveyard shift. Later, we were latchkey kids, like millions of others, until early evening.

We had no car, no fancy toys and no private lessons and, thanks to my various tomboy accidents, frequent hour-long bus rides to the bloodstained floors of the public hospital's emergency room.

End sob story.

Here's the question: Now that I've climbed out of that life and married someone who was never in it, how can we teach our children gratitude?

Our kids are ages seven and five. They live in wonderfully decorated bedrooms in a big house in a leafy suburb with an excellent public school, plenty of private lessons, a stay-at-home parent/chauffeuse, mountains of toys and an almost steady supply of \$8 bottles of pure maple syrup for their toaster waffles.

All along, I've tried to introduce the concept of poverty.

When at first they groaned about having to carry one bag of groceries from the back of the station wagon to the front door, I regaled them with stories of my mother walking home from Safeway with three loaded bags clutched to her chest.

About a year into their complaints about our cooking, we sponsored a girl who is exactly my daughter's age in Zambia and read about her life growing up in an AIDS community. Then, for years, I invoked that poor child's name: "Do you think Lisabel would complain about having to eat asparagus?" and "Lisabel doesn't even *have* a toy room to clean..."

This seemed to work for a while, but then it stopped, and I decided it was unfair to use little Lisabel as a battering ram.

Next up: The People Improvement Organization, a nonprofit that sets up schools in Cambodia for children who would otherwise spend their day scavenging garbage dumps for recyclables their families can sell for food.

Their [Web site](#) features a video of children and their parents rummaging through garbage dumps. I screened that for my privileged two, hoping it would make some lasting impact on their psyches, and that they would never again complain about the free food that magically appears on their dinner plates each night.

And yes, my kids feel for those kids. And we donated. But my kids don't really see what that has to do with them.

Which I suppose was the point, when I set out to give them a life so very different from mine.

In the end, I've managed to suck some gratitude out of them in a much simpler way--by getting them to buy some of their own toys.

I've never bought anything for my kids on demand, and they know not to ask. But until recently, I also never gave them enough money to regularly spend on their own, so they weren't in the habit of understanding what things cost.

Now, I'm giving them change for some of the harder household chores, plus I'm over-paying them for our family [summer reading challenge](#). Our goal: 2,000 pages per person before the first day of school.

Their money goes into identical piggy banks, where it is divided into four holes that empty into four feet: Save (for a big toy), Spend, Invest and Give. (Give goes to Lisabel.)

Once monied in the Spend and Save compartments, my kids started lusting through the LEGO catalog, where they noticed that the horse trailer kits run just \$20, while the Eiffel Tower is \$200.

"Two hundred dollars? That's crazy!" my 7-year-old daughter yelled.

"How much is this one?" my son asked.

"One hundred ninety-nine ..."

"That's just one wess! This page is too 'spensive!!"

Then they rustled the pages, found less-expensive items and plotted how much cleaning they can do to buy something totally different: the \$53.50 [Littlest Pet Shop](#) thing my daughter once spied in Target.

That was my cue. Once they understood how little they have, how little they earn and how much things cost, I could talk to them about their luxuries.

They now know that two swimming lessons equals almost one Littlest Pet Shop; that we have dropped gym class for now because it costs two Eiffel towers for each kid (they gasped); and that if my son's wayward limbs manage to break our picture window, it will cost at least \$1,000, which is five, count 'em five, Eiffel Towers--and may force us to cancel our next beach vacation.

This, at last, has had a profound effect. The kids now actually thank us for their private lessons and they savor every last drop from those \$8 bottles of maple syrup.

With prompting, of course.

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