

Proactive Parenting January 2016

Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude

Now that the New Year has arrived, many of us will reflect on the joys and challenges, healthy ones and perhaps very difficult ones, from this past year, and vow to approach life's ups and downs in a healthier manner. For parents it is especially important to take stock of how we handle the bumps in the road, because our attitudes, positive and negative, affect the culture of our family life and our children in immeasurable ways. To use a nautical analogy; "How you set your sail determines your course in life, not the forces of nature", and as every flight attendant is trained to instruct; we must put on our own oxygen mask before we can attempt to help our children. We know life will bring all of us some smooth sailing, some bumpy waters, and undoubtedly some times where we must traverse very rough seas. How we set our sail and steer our ship will determine how we navigate life's journeys. We can choose to fight against the wind and waves, risking peril, or we can head into the wind and let the sails luff, knowing that acceptance of what we cannot control is the first step to facing and working through life's difficulties. We can make the choice to set our sail in such a way that we harness what we can from an ill wind, letting the harsher gales escape, and trimming the sails just enough to propel us forward. As we do this we build the strength, courage, and momentum to reach a safe harbor.

In her bestselling book; "Mindset, the New Psychology of Success", researcher and author Carol S. Dweck, PhD. writes about our approach to life in terms of two basic mindsets, one is a *fixed-mindset*, while the other is *growth -minded*. She shares that; "For twenty years my research has shown that the view you adopt for your self profoundly affects the way you lead your life." If we approach life focusing on our effort, our ability to grow, learn, change, and adapt, then these internal processes become far more important than any external product of success or failure, such as test grades, job loss, promotions, material wealth, etc. At school we talk to the kids about framing challenges as 'big problems' or 'little problems'. Too often children and adults react to little problems in a way that blows them all out of proportion. Helping kids see day to day challenges in manageable bits and giving them the skills to cope with and work through problems helps them build an attitude that they can solve life's truly big problems when they do come along. These tools enable young and old alike to see the 'glass is half -full' possibilities even during very difficult at times. In the same vain, failure can be viewed as a vehicle for helping us learn to get up and approach things in a new way. We can let failure define us- or we can use it as a catalyst, leading us to novel attempts, real learning, and creating our own successes. Being able to work through loss and failure, rather than avoiding or denying it, puts the focus on our internal attitude, grit, emotional skills, and efforts. We can teach our children to cultivate an attitude of accepting and even welcoming challenges, solving problems, and believing that life is about being open every day to endless possibilities for learning and growth.

Happiness and success can be defined in as many ways as there are people, but if we define them in terms of human connections, rather than material gain, then how we approach each human interaction is fundamental to how positive and 'happy' we will be in life. There is a wonderful Ted Talk by Monk and Scholar David Stendl-Rast, with the provocative title; "Want to be Happy? Be Grateful" In it he turns generally accepted ideas

about happiness inside –out. He proposes that it is not being happy that makes us grateful, but rather- *living gratefully* – that leads to true happiness. He talks about people who have been through great tragedies, and yet have found a way to be happy. He speaks about approaching each day as a gift, full of possibilities, and suggests that we ‘stop, look, and go’ gratefully through life with the lens of what we have, rather than a lens of deficit, of always wishing for more. As parents, one the greatest gifts we can give our children is modeling and teaching how to face life’s ups and downs with a grateful heart, open to possibilities, and focused on the process of solving life’s challenges, rather than the product of any particular failure or success. When we are truly grateful we can live in the ‘present’ moment and this can help us focus forward on potential learning and growth. Happiness is internal, and the best gifts don’t come in a box, they are inside each and every one of us. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude can help all of us more gracefully navigate life’s waters.

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