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Gratitude and Entitlement

Imagine two 17-year-old boys (or girls), similar to each other in many ways. Both have good grades, are active on their school teams, heading for college, pretty close with their parents. Neither has been in any serious trouble. But they each have an aura about them that most adults sense instantly. The one gives off a deep sense of gratitude, the other an equally deep sense of entitlement.

The first 17-year-old recognizes that he won the birth lottery. He has lived his entire life without a moment's worry about where his next meal would come from, whether the water he was about to drink would be safe. The schools he attended were all above average, medical care was available and convenient. A life like this might be taken for granted and it is wonderful that this young man had learned to feel gratitude for such "unremarkable" aspects of life.

The adults he encounters almost always comment on how deep his sense of gratitude is. When he does well in school, he talks about how lucky he is to have had a supportive family, such great teachers and opportunities. When his team wins a game or a tournament, even when his own contribution was instrumental, he credits his coaches, his teammates, the hours his father spent practicing with him and the hours his mother spent driving him to games and practices. When something bad happens to one of his friends or relatives, he is saddened and tries to do something supportive or at least to make sure they know he is there for them.

When adults first meet the other 17-year-old they are struck by his abundance of self-confidence. It soon becomes tiresome. When this boy does well academically he acts like it is to be expected. If he doesn't get the grade he thinks he deserved it is always the teacher's fault. Same thing with sports. He hogs the ball, is not a team player, sounds conceited and boastful when his team wins and lets people know that his contribution to the outcome was instrumental.

Gratitude and entitlement. We all want our children to be grateful and humble when they are 17-year-olds rather than grandiose. There is very little appealing about a young man who believes he is special or believes the world owes him whatever it is he wants that day. The difference between these two young men is most likely due to how they were parented.

Three things usually combine to produce a teenager with an obnoxious sense of entitlement. During the pre-teen years, the child who is on his way to becoming an entitled teenager:

- Was worshipped by his parents. Every art project was magnificent. Every deed was amazing.
- Was not disciplined at younger ages when the self-centeredness was first developing.
- Was deprived of opportunities to observe and serve the less fortunate.

Children, especially children who are fortunate enough to live in comfortable families need to be allowed to see and be moved by uncomfortable circumstances. No matter how busy a family is with academics and sports, it helps to devote some time to programs that offer assistance to others. Children are more likely to grow up with gratitude when they have been allowed to see and help others who are less comfortable. If you already have this as part of your family life, perhaps take a moment during this holiday season to pat yourself on the back. If not, now could be the perfect time to find a cause to commit to.

In thirty years of working with families I have not met the parent who has regretted the time spent with their children giving back to others. And yes, it is a sacrifice. It will take time away from something else that also has value.

Maybe that is what makes it such a meaningful part of childhood.

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Dr. Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*, now available for e-readers and as an audio book in addition to paperback.