

## Gratitude: the antidote to entitlement

Children are wired to want what they want when they want it. Is it worse now than ever? Possibly yes and possibly no. "More recent generations tend to score higher on narcissism tests than the same age group of previous generations, and entitlement is a facet of narcissism," says Jean M. Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University and the author of *Generation Me*. But other experts, including Kali Trzesniewski, disagree that kids today are more self-obsessed. The tsk-tsking may just be natural behavior for adults with foggy memories of their own childhoods. (Because, yes, most of us outgrow it.) Experts often talk about materialism in the same breath as entitlement because the two overlap. Materialism is a desire for stuff; entitlement is the belief that we should have these things now without putting in the effort. There's no time that brings all of this to light more than the holidays. Luckily, teaching your children to be grateful for the stuff can temper materialism and entitlement at the same time. "Gratitude reinforces the kindness of others and motivates the recipient to reciprocate," says Jeffrey J. Froh, an associate professor of psychology at Hofstra University, in Hempstead, New York, and a coauthor of *Making Grateful Kids*. Translation: "Kid, you got that trip or toy because I love you, not because you necessarily deserve it or are the coolest 12-year-old in the universe. P.S. Write a thank-you note."

## 2 WAYS TO ENCOURAGE MORE GRATITUDE

**Pepper in daily reminders.** "We have little conversations all the time: 'Do you have shoes on your feet without holes in them? Did you have hot water this morning in the shower? Be grateful!'" says Kay Wills Wyma, a mother of five who fought entitlement by assigning household responsibilities (chronicled in her book, *Cleaning House*). "Reboot their focus."

### 1. Plan not-so-random acts of kindness.

It could be just throwing away another kid's trash at lunch (but not pointing it out), says Wyma. Train them to focus on others rather than themselves, which is the basis of entitlement, says Jeffrey Froh. Grandiose gestures, like a family trip to the soup kitchen, are nice but can feel isolated. "By helping others in small ways, like shoveling an elderly neighbor's driveway, gratitude becomes more woven into who we are," says Froh.

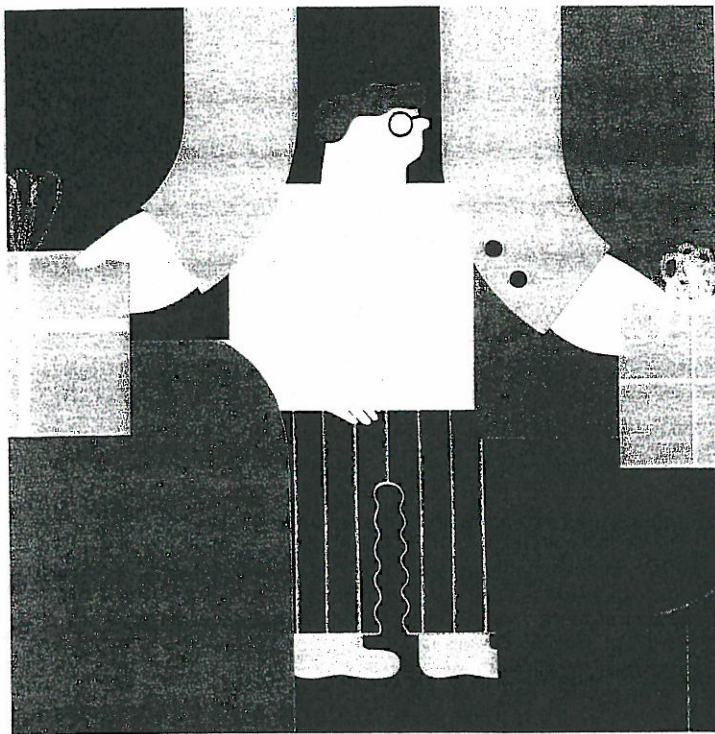
### 2. Talk and write about it.

If materialism is obsessing about what we don't have, gratitude is the opposite: concentrating on what we do have. Verbalize it around the dinner table, or have kids keep a journal. "They take the time to think, *Well, that was nice of Mom or Dad to drive me to soccer or help me with my math homework.* It counterbalances that sense of entitlement, helping kids to be content with what they have instead of wanting more," says James A. Roberts, a professor of marketing at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas, and the author of *Shiny Objects*.

Challenge social media. Research linking social media and entitlement is in its infancy. But common sense

tells us that endless scrolls of vacation and new-outfit pictures can't be good, says Wyma. "Ask your kids, 'How did you feel when you were talking to or helping someone else in person today?' Then 'How did you feel on Instagram?'" she says. "They may surprise you and back off social media a bit." At a minimum, this starts a valuable conversation.





### 3 HOLIDAY-GIFT STRATEGIES

"If a child is tearing through presents without a thoughtful, appreciative pause, that's a red flag for potential entitlement," says Karen Deerwester, a parenting coach in Boca Raton, Florida, and the author of *The Entitlement-Free Child*. If you're thinking, *Crap, we're doomed*, read on.

#### 1. Give fewer gifts.

No matter how much money you have to burn on Amazon, limit yourself, says John C. Friel, a family psychologist in St. Paul. He suggests one fairly large present and two smaller ones. It's easy to make this the norm with young kids; for older ones, explain that this year the focus is going to be on relationships with others instead of gifts. "You'll have one holiday with some whining and complaining, but stick with it," says Friel. When we fill the living room, he says, "we're training kids to never be happy, because they'll never know what enough is." Fewer gifts also mean less stress for you.

#### 2. Set rules once it's all unwrapped.

Let's be real: It's hard to control grandparents (and still be respectful).

Ever heard "I'll ask Nana—she'll totally get me the iPhone 6" and then she does? Remember that you do have control over the stuff once it's in your home, says Deerwester. Your child can keep the phone but hand it over after 6 P.M., for example, or use half his time on the new Wii to play with his little sister. (This rule helps with whole-class, 22-gift birthday-party loot, too.)

#### 3. Insist on thank-yous.

Teach children that there's a person behind the present. Prompt three-year-olds to say "Thank you." Once kids can write, help them go beyond a generic "Thank you—I love it." Let a drama lover make a video—modeling the hand-knit hat—to send to Aunt Linda. It may feel rote at first, but eventually, says Jeffrey Froh, expressing that gratitude will become genuine: "Start early and keep at it."

### WHAT TO SAY WHEN...

...it's Christmas morning/Hanukkah/her birthday/a Tuesday, and your child comes out with one of these gems.

*[Sighs.]* "I wanted the red one."

Not every gift is a home run. Do not run back to the store, says Jim Fay, a coauthor of *From Innocence to Entitlement*. For young kids, empathize: "That's how I feel, too, when I don't get exactly what I want." Says Fay: "It's more meaningful to have parents understand kids' feelings than it is to fix the problem." At any age, you can remind her that something is better than nothing.

*[Tosses gift aside.]* "Next!"

"Just say, 'Every present is given with love,'" says Karen Deerwester. (Drop this line before the holidays, too.) Focus on other rituals: making snowmen, baking cookies. "Believe it or not, kids don't really want a superficial holiday built around stuff," she says.

"I need that video game."

Sticker charts aren't only for potty training.

A 10-year-old can learn from a reward system. He earns points for good behavior; a point equals \$1 toward a \$60 game. Lesson: You don't get something for nothing.

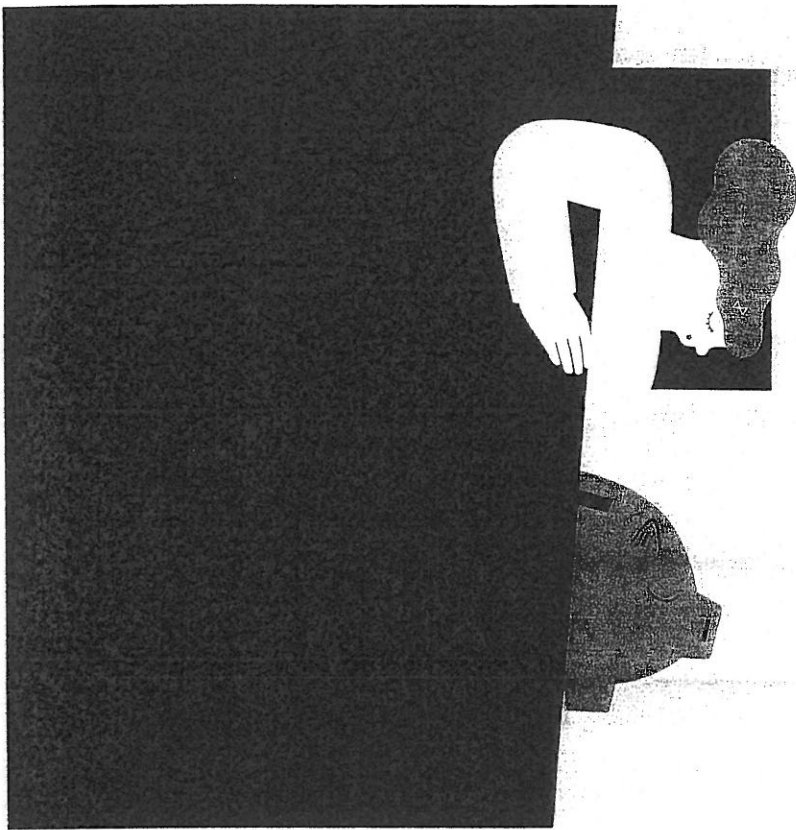
"I made good grades. I'm getting an iPad."

"If you bribe a child with stuff to get good grades, he'll always up the ante," says Deerwester. If it's a year-round practice, it's hard to change the rules in December. Focus on praising personal successes (ignoring any eye rolls). Your child will truly value that more than a gift. And then presents go back to what they are meant to be: genuine tokens of affection.

"Mia is going to Aruba over break. We're going to Grandma's?"

You can put things in perspective without putting down other families' spending choices, says Fay. Let older kids be part of budget discussions or watch you pay bills. When the neighbors go skiing, say, "That's great. Maybe we can work toward that."





## WORK FOR IT

### Teaching the true value of American Girl swag.

BY AMY SHEARN

In the case that you have never encountered American Girl Place, all you really need to know is that when one purchases one's first hundred-dollar doll, it comes with a Starter Collection. You don't buy a doll, you buy a habit. For my daughter's second birthday, she was given a Bitty Baby, the gateway American Girl drug, er, doll, whom she calls Special Baby, or Spesh for short. Spesh has one lazy eye but accessories to die for. Recently my five-year-old daughter spied in the American Girl catalog (it is easier to rid oneself of bedbugs than it is to unsubscribe from this particular publication) the Bitty Baby Crib. This crib is gorgeous. It is also \$115, or the approximate cost of an actual baby crib. Because we are mean and horrible, my husband and I explained that if she

wanted to save up the money herself, she could. Our daughter is not, I regret to report, gainfully employed. But as five-year-olds go, she is very determined. She agreed to our terms and began gathering up her little brother's toys to sell.

We devoted the next weekend to the Special Baby's Crib Fund Benefit Stoop Sale and Lemonade Stand. We were pretty proud of ourselves. What stellar parenting! My husband and I organized sale items and chalked the neighborhood sidewalk with signs. Our daughter screamed, "LEMONAAAAADE!" at passersby for 20 minutes and then asked if she had enough quarters to stop.

The next day, she reported that her brother was pulling all the underwear out of his dresser drawers but that she would be happy to "babysit" him if I was busy. "Oh, and I charge a dollar an hour," she added. This kid was really learning the value of hard work, I thought proudly. Later, mid-temper tantrum: "I could stop crying and get ready nicely for FIVE DOLLARS." And she was also learning the value of...

extortion! But \$115 is a lot of clams. The project dragged on. Every night she would count out her money and ask why it was taking so long to become the correct amount. We all started getting weary of the eternal teachable moment. Given that my husband and I were knocking ourselves out to help her "save" enough money, were we really doing anything to make her feel less entitled? She never for a moment doubted that she would someday get Spesh's crib. And neither, truth be told, did we.

Then came the fateful day when we estimated she had earned enough and dumped out her treasure chest's worth of coins to be counted. Amazingly, she had \$126.47. We went to the American Girl store, and there was the crib, in a beam of heavenly light, kitted out with a handful of *not-included* princessy accessories.

My daughter studied the display, assimilating the idea that her saved-up kitty paid for only the crib plus tax and not the canopy, monitor, blankets, and extra doll featured. We had been afraid of this. And, as she is somewhat given to high-volume histrionics, we were bracing ourselves. My husband had even drawn up and had her sign a contract, before we had left, that stipulated dire consequences in case of temper fits. So I was shocked and amazed and so proud to see her reaction. Maybe some part of our improvised kitchen-table TED talk on perseverance had actually stuck with her. Or maybe she was really growing up. Because after surveying the crib accessories for a long moment, she shrugged—this child who knows how to get exactly what she wants—and said, "I'll save up for those next. I'm sure I can do it!"

AMY SHEARN is the author of the novel *The Mermaid of Brooklyn*. She lives in Brooklyn.



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