

Parent-Child Conversations About Gratitude: A Thematic Analysis



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Background

Gratitude has been found to be linked with increased prosociality, well-being, life satisfaction, optimism, and happiness (Dickens, 2019; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Ma, Tunney & Ferguson, 2017). Nevertheless, little is known about how gratitude is socialized in children (Hussong, Langley, Coffman, Halberstadt, & Costanzo, 2017). Although parent-child conversations about gratitude have been shown to contribute to children’s gratitude development (Hussong et al., 2019a), little is known regarding the content of those conversations.

In the current study, we explored the following questions:

1. What types of events do parents consider to be ones in which children were grateful (G) and when they missed the opportunity to be grateful (MO)?
2. What types of conversational messages support children’s gratitude development?

Methods

A total of 43 parent child-dyads’ conversations were analyzed for this study. The majority of participating parents were mothers (88.10% mothers, all cisgender; 76.74% European American, 6.97% White Latinx, 2.32% American Indian or Alaska Native, 6.97% Asian American, 4.65% Other, and 2.32% did not report.) The average age for participating children was 10.62 years (SD=1.15, range 8-13; 51.16% male, 1 participant was transgender).

Participating dyads were part of a larger longitudinal study (N=101) on parents’ socialization of children’s gratitude in North Carolina, USA (Hussong et al., 2018). A month before participating in the conversation, children reported their gratitude moments behaviors (Daily Gratitude Questionnaire (DGQ), Hussong et al., 2019a,c), and the day of the recording of parent-child conversations, children again reported their gratitude moments. Parents and children were asked to talk about a gratitude and missed opportunity event for 10 minutes. Conversations were video recorded. To investigate the content of the gratitude conversations, we employed a thematic analytical approach, which allowed for a systematic investigation in identifying patterns of messages, shared meanings, and experiences that are within the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

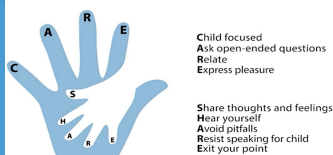


Figure 1. CARE/SHARE Approaches

Gratitude Conversation Program Elements



- Psycho-Education
- Modeling Poor and Good Strategies
- Feedback and Reflection
- Goal Setting

Table 1: Parent & Child Messages and Child Gratitude Growth

Child Gratitude	Parent Messages	Child Messages
Growth	Asked if child remembers (G) Describes child’s feelings (G). Describes how child’s gratitude makes parent feel good (G).	Shared more how they felt (excited, happy).
No Growth	Multiple definitions of gratitude (e.g. ungrateful by being upset [MO]). Highlighted their own feelings and prompted child’s gratitude during MO. Minimized negative event.	Explains transgressive behavior more (MO). Disagrees with parent. Denies the event occurred.

Note. MO= missed opportunity event conversation, G= grateful event conversation.

Results

Types of Grateful/Ungrateful Events

Grateful events were described as ones in which the child received an opportunity to: **attend an event, receive a gift, food, or assistance, or engage in prosocial actions.**

Missed Opportunity events were described as one in which which children were described as acting entitled or ungrateful by complaining, asking for more, or not doing what was expected of them when presented with the same events described above.

Messages

In conversations where children demonstrated growth in gratitude, parents often focused on children’s feelings and noted that the event made the child feel good. Similarly, children reported how they felt more frequently. On the other hand, in conversations in which the child reported no growth in gratitude, parents tended to use multiple definitions of gratitude, highlight their own upset feelings, and minimize the event in which they described the child to have not been grateful. Moreover, children were more likely to explain why they were not grateful, disagree with their parents, and to deny that the event the parent described occurred. Our findings suggest that the process of encouraging children to remember, recognize and create room to talk about both parent and child positive emotions contribute to children’s gratitude development. Moreover, children with no growth were more likely to be defensive in conversations about missed opportunities. Future research should investigate what conversational messages and approaches may be linked with children’s defensiveness about transgressive behavior.

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