Wellbeing at School and at Home in New Mexico

November 18th, 2020: Genuine Gratitude

An offering to New Mexicans from the faculty and students of the Department of Individual, Family and Community Education at the University of New Mexico.
Gratitude is important to our wellbeing.

Taking time daily to briefly journal several things for which you are thankful definitely improves mental health. Pausing formally on Thanksgiving Day to gather (virtually this year, please!) with family and friends aids our relationships and our wellbeing.

Gratitude needs to be genuine, though, and not mask the challenges, losses, struggles and pain we all experience. Toxic positivity is denying our negative emotions and “keeping our chin up”, “having positive vibes” even when there are reasons for real negative emotions. Thanksgiving Day is a good reminder for us amidst the pandemic to be genuinely grateful.

Many years ago, when I was in college, I attended mass at a different church in a neighboring town. It was unusual for me since I have always been a music minister in the church which means I usually attend services at the same place and same time each week. On that particular Sunday, for some reason I can’t recall, our evening mass was cancelled. So, having recently arrived in northern California many years before the iPhone and Google Maps, I drove across a couple of towns until I found a church that had an evening service.

The sermon that evening centered on the idea that “a gift is not a gift until you give it away.” The priest shared a story of someone giving him a coat that he appreciated but ultimately, he gave the coat away to another person. He discussed how intricately the act of giving and the experience of gratefulness are inherently intertwined in human nature. When it comes to being grateful it turns out, we enter an experience that allows us to simultaneously give to others and to ourselves.

Being grateful is the experience of showing an appreciation of kindness. Appreciation begins with an acknowledgment followed by an appraisal of something good. Appreciation is therefore the first part of being grateful; it is antecedent to the gift of giving. Why is giving a gift? It is a gift because giving is as beneficial to the benefactor as it is to the beneficiary. This may be why many religions around the world value some form of gratitude as a central aspect of their beliefs and practices. Perhaps gratitude, thankfulness, and being grateful begin with an awareness and an acknowledgement but end with the realization of what is truly meaningful in human life. It may be the case that the answer to what is the meaning of life is ours, not for the taking, but for the giving!

The word gratitude is rooted in the Latin word gratia. This Latin derivation means graciousness, grace, and gratefulness applied in different contexts and situations. Clearly, gratefulness is a reaction following receipt of some gift, it is not as apparent that gratefulness is also a gift to others and ourselves. How is it a gift to ourselves? Being grateful to someone or for something given or something experienced is certainly a gift to ourselves. It affords something valuable, something meaningful, and something that fills our needs whether physical, social, or psychological.

Over time, more than gratefulness being a gift of thanksgiving toward others, it becomes a means by which we experience dispositional transformation. This dispositional change opens us to see future experiences in a way that allows us to attain positive and optimistic orientations. This new disposition originates from a patterning of gratefulness. It is what positive psychologists understand as possessing gratitude.

Perhaps Fr. Jim’s message that night was how believers can “turn to the light” by simply giving to others which in turn, renders blessings to themselves. Though gone since 2010, there are still many web pages that refer to his mantra and constant advice: “never give up” on ourselves & “never give up” on God, because as Fr. Jim always clarified, God will never give up on you.
Perhaps the point of the sermon about the coat as a gift received and a gift given was to illustrate that dispositional gratitude is a way to sustain ourselves in a challenging and sometimes toxic world, and by doing so, we prevent ourselves from giving up on ourselves and others.

Psychological science is clear that there are many benefits that come from gratitude. Gratitude makes us happy; it makes us resilient; it gives us a positive orientation and outlook on life. Gratitude fills our needs of connectedness and relatedness with others, even if those others are only memories. Gratitude leads to psychological well-being. It is the means by which we nurture ourselves and it is the way to form compassion for others and for experiencing self-compassion. Research has shown that gratitude is both a precursor and product of being mindful. Mindfulness is the way we are present in the moment and in a state of non-judgment.

The UC Davis Medical Center tells us that “gratitude is good medicine.” They share that researchers have found that by maintaining a gratitude diary, adults experienced a sustained 28% reduction in depression and a 23% reduction in stress hormones. Other researchers found that by keeping a gratitude journal, dietary fat intake was reduced by 25%. Grateful people have a 16% lower diastolic blood pressure. Also, gratitude results in at least a 10% improvement in our quality of sleep. Most surprisingly, the simple act of writing a letter of gratitude resulted in reduced feelings of hopelessness in 88% of suicidal patients and promoted increased feelings of optimism in 94% of patients.

I think that the benefits to both physical and psychological well-being makes it quite clear that gratitude is indeed a gift to ourselves. I encourage you to look around, look back in time, and look to the future. There is much to be grateful for and because of this, there are many opportunities to experience the gift of gratitude in your life.

Most of all, I am grateful for my daughter. I am also grateful for her sharing the music of Jason Mraz who often sings about gratitude:

May you have auspiciousness and causes of success
May you have the confidence to always do your best
May you take no effort in your being generous
Sharing what you can, nothing more nothing less
May you know the meaning of the word happiness
May you always lead from the being in your chest (Have It All, 2018)

I am grateful for having known Fr. Jim. I am grateful I found the church that night way back in 1990. I am grateful I lingered around after the service to thank the musicians in the music group. I am forever grateful that my thankfulness allowed me to meet the pianist... who 5 years later, became my beautiful bride! Now that’s clearly grace, the unmerited favor and love of God.

If you or someone you know need resources at this time, here are some places offering assistance:
- Food for kids in New Mexico and More food for kids.
- New Mexico rent and housing assistance available in November.
- Navajo families can qualify for $1,500 emergency COVID-19 payment.
- Here’s a list of mutual aid programs around New Mexico.
- Give help or get help from the Enchanted Circle Community Organizations Active in Disaster.
- New Mexico’s Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) hotline for parents: 1-833-415-0569.

We’re eight months in, and the COVID-19 cases just keep coming. We must, must pace ourselves. This is definitely a marathon, not a sprint.

- You’ve depleted your surge capacity and now you feel awful.
- Sleepless nights, hair loss and cracked teeth: pandemic stress takes its toll.
- How to fight Pandemic Fatigue in New Mexico.
- It’s dinnertime already????! Fighting Pandemic Cooking Fatigue.
- Small changes can battle burnout.

A Friend of IFCE Perspective
Fostering the Attitude of Gratitude
By Dorothy L. Kerwin
Associate Director of the Family Development Program

Once upon a time, not so long ago or faraway, we all awoke to the upside down, inside out, discombobulated world that the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought. For many of us, we have found that the mindful practice of being grateful has been a helpful strategy to deal with ever present stresses of managing life during these times. We look for the silver linings: the slowing down from the frantic pace of before, time spent with loved ones, learning new skills and reconnecting with old ones such as baking and gardening. We have learned that if we make it an actual practice to count our blessings, we look at the world from a more positive perspective. In recent years studies have shown that the act of being grateful has a positive effect on our minds, our moods and our overall health. In his pioneer study of gratitude, USC neurosurgeon Glenn Fox, discovered a connection between gratitude and the area of our brain that are linked to both relationships and reduction in stress (Click HERE for more information).
As we have come to understand the importance of appreciation to our overall well-being, parents and caregivers recognize the need to share this gift with our children.

So how do we inspire an attitude of gratitude in our young children so that it becomes a lifelong practice that they can rely on during both joyful and stressful times? How do we help our children shift from saying thank you as a means of being polite into understanding the meaning of gratitude? How do we foster the idea of Counting Our Blessings as a natural reaction to experiences that they encounter?

As with most values that we would like to pass on, we can intentionally promote appreciation and gratitude in the following ways: through example; by giving words to express feelings, by discussing gratitude in stories that we read and tell to our children; by asking questions that invite our little ones to explore the meaning of their experiences and interactions; and by engaging in fun activities that spark joy and curiosity while encouraging a spirit of gratitude.

Young children are observant sponges who are observing and learning from how the adults in their lives interact with others. This gives us multiple opportunities to model giving thanks throughout the day: to store clerks and delivery personnel, to someone who held open a door or let your car merge into their lane. Make it a habit to give genuine thanks. The recipient as well as the child watching notice when your thanks is authentic versus automatic. Take time to notice your child and offer thanks for the little things that they do as well. As humans we are wired to connect and it makes us feel good to be recognized. When we recognize our children with gratitude, it allows them to feel appreciated.

Gratitude. Appreciation. Children can learn to understand the meaning of these big words when we use them frequently and talk about what they mean. “I appreciate that you picked up your toys without being told. It makes me feel calm and peaceful when everything is put away.” “Let’s go pick the yummy tomatoes. I am so grateful that they are ripe.” Children have lots of ideas that they like to share.

Ask questions about what they are grateful for and talk about how that makes them feel. Their answers will often reveal how they are thinking and what they know or don’t know about gratitude. If you think about your child’s current favorite storybook character, can you think of questions that you could ask that would help your child understand gratitude?

Many families create Thanksgiving Day rituals that involve giving thanks. One of our family favorites was putting cream in a jar with clean marble and letting each person at the table shake it as they shared what they were thankful for. This would continue until the cream had turned into whipped cream to put on the pumpkin pie. But instead of only once a year, try creating a weekly or daily ritual. It is wonderful for our dreams to recall all of the things that brought us joy throughout the day and say thank you.

Gratitude is a gift that is worth the time and effort it takes to help our children to understand and practice it. For more ideas and inspiration:

- **Nurturing Gratitude**
- **Raising Thankful Children**
- **Fostering Gratitude**
- **Tips for Raising Grateful Kids**

For happier holidays in quarantine, practice gratitude this Thanksgiving.

This site provides ideas to practice gratitude throughout the holiday season!

Relaxing sounds from 50 vacation hotspots. Close your eyes and be there!

Here are some things for which we in Individual, Family and Community Education are grateful:

- “My large yard, my children and my community.” -- Maria-Elena Salazar, Lecturer in Family and Child Studies.
- “Having the financial stability to keep up with my daily living expenses.” -- Graduate student in Counselor Education.
- “I am grateful for all the daily tasks I do to keep working on my degree.” -- Graduate student in Educational Psychology.
- “Getting to spend time with my family” -- Undergraduate student in Family and Child Studies.
- “Stable job where I can work from home, wife’s stable job, technology means to keep working on my degree.” -- Cari Hushman, Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology.
- “That I am able to work from home, but have the ability to come in to the office if needed.” -- Diana Gonzales-Pacheco, Assistant Professor of Nutrition.
- “For supportive family and colleagues. I cannot conceive of persevering through the pandemic without them. I am also grateful for students who continue to strive and show their resilience in the face of personal, community, and worldwide trauma.” -- Alumni & Instructor of Educational Psychology.
- “I’m grateful for our professors and their understanding during this time. This pandemic impacted a lot of our lives in ways we never thought would happen. For our professors to be understandable and flexible with us is amazing because they don’t have to do that. But, they take every person and their situation into consideration.” -- Desiray Maez, undergraduate student in Family and Child Studies.
- “That my children are healthy and happy.” -- Lindsey, graduate student in Educational Psychology.
- “My family and my education.” -- Graduate student in Nutrition/ Dietetics.
An IFCE Perspective

Stressed Kids? Maybe that’s OK.
By Alexandra N. Davis
Assistant Professor of Family and Child Studies

Gains and Losses
All of these changes!
Some are true losses big and small.
Some, though, are gains.

An IFCE Perspective

It’s OK to not be OK.
By Ashley Martin-Cuellar
Lecturer of Family and Child Studies

Oftentimes, I feel like I have to look on the positive side of things. I know research tells me this is the case… Having a grateful orientation or disposition is good for well-being. I certainly consider myself optimistic and value the benefits of being in a positive mood, but I can’t ignore the frustration of someone else telling me to be grateful… “You should be grateful for ______, it made you who you are.” While, yes, it did, it still sucks sometimes!

Although a gratitude perspective is an important perspective to have, I’ve learned that it’s okay to not be okay. In fact, feeling the emotion, the negative emotion, is certainly healthier than not allowing myself to feel anything at all. Stuffing feelings away doesn’t allow us to experience them, feel them, and then move through them. Feeling all emotions is healthy. When we stop feeling the negative ones, we also don’t feel the positive ones to their fullest.

I have been struggling with guilt for some of my emotions during the pandemic—being sad, discouraged, bored, tired of the monotony—and finding myself trying to look on the bright side of things… or telling myself that I should be grateful. I am absolutely grateful for so many things in my life, but I am also sad, discouraged, bored, and tired of the monotony. I think gratitude and these emotions can co-exist.

In the spirit of gratitude during this time of year, let us honor all emotions and feelings. Let us not minimize the emotions of others, because we can all probably admit, right now, some things just suck.

Toxic positivity is being positive all the time, especially when something truly negative is going on. Here are some articles about toxic positivity:

- Don’t Always Look on the Brightside!
- Toxic Positivity
- Toxity Positivity and Mental Health Wellness
- Empathy vs. Sympathy

During this pandemic, one thing I have heard from many parents is how difficult the transition has been for their kids. Some parents are feeling sad because of the monumental change and the fact that many kids are no longer seeing friends, attending school in person, or participating in typical extra curricular activities. Some kids are even isolated from extended family members who they miss spending time with, and parents are understandably worried about this seclusion and lack of interaction. As a mom to a 4 month-old, I also feel isolated and sometimes sad that she has not met her extended family and has never been inside a store or seen more than about 6 people in a room at the same time. She is really used to seeing people in masks, and has only seen a few people ever smile at her. I wonder how all of this might shape her developing brain. No one expected this pandemic to last as long as it has, and the “new normal” for many families is one that might make parents feel worried about their children’s development and the loss of experiences and milestones their children are missing during this time. While it is true that children are missing out on typical experiences, it is also true that this can be a time where children learn resilience and gain valuable experiences they might never have had in their typical daily lives.

My research at the University of New Mexico focuses on how stress and environmental risk can promote moral development, including perspective taking and empathy for others and prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors include helping behaviors and are not only indicative of morality and positive functioning, but they are also related to health and general well-being. Most parents will say that they want their kids to develop into good, helpful people, so focusing on prosocial behaviors is important. There is also evidence that prosocial behaviors among youth are positively associated with academic performance, social competence and healthy relationships, and physical and mental health. Kids who are helpful tend to do well in school and in other areas of development. Therefore, an important question is, “how might the pandemic impact prosocial behaviors for youth?” Are kids becoming more isolated, or are they finding ways to stay connected?

In our research, we find that youth and young adults who experience stress, such as traumatic life events and stress associated with the economy and lack of resources, sometimes feel a strong desire to connect with their community and help others. When kids can understand the situations of others, they also tend to feel empathy for others and want to help, often in selfless ways. We find similar patterns of results across diverse populations, including youth from different geographic contexts (Midwest, Northeast, Southwest), youth from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and youth from different class brackets. These results are important because they suggest that parents can help promote perspective taking in their kids, and this perspective taking can help them develop resilience during this time of stress by focusing on how they can be an agent of positivity in their communities. Instead of focusing on what kids are missing, we as parents can focus on what they are gaining and how they can be a light to others. Maybe that can be a silver lining for parents who are feeling sad for their kids. Focus on the helpers and promote care and connection.
COVID & the Holidays

A New Mexico doctor reflects on what treating COVID-19 patients has been like.

Being together doesn’t have to mean getting together. With the pandemic spreading quickly in New Mexico, the governor’s 5-person limit on gatherings, and the credible reports that private and family gatherings are a deadly source of COVID-19 spread, please make plans to celebrate this holiday season which do not involve large, indoor gatherings. If Macy’s can cancel the Thanksgiving Day Parade, you, too, can rethink your traditions this year. Here are some thoughts about how to decline an invitation because of the pandemic.

How risky could getting together be? You can actually see how tweaks to your plans might change the risk with this tool or with this tool. You can be together without getting together.

Here are some ideas:


During this pandemic, gratitude is a foundational pillar of our family’s daily routine. We challenge ourselves to be grateful to one another in good times and bad. In the evenings as we sit around the dinner table, we engage in a sharing practice called “Roses, Thorns and Roots.” A rose is something that went well that day or a point of happiness. A thorn is something that went poorly that day or a point of anger, frustration or sadness. A root is what was learned either from the rose, the thorn, the rose and thorn, or just a new fun fact or discovery. It is through this reflective process that we show our gratitude to each other and to those around us on a daily basis.

As we entered the Covid era and remote learning requirements, we found ourselves losing sight of this practice due to the fact we had little to share because we were around each other all day. There were few roses, thorns or roots that we all didn’t already know about or related so directly to one another it wasn’t worth revisiting. The thorn was particularly challenging because it often resulted in arguments between our children about how someone was treated by another sibling. It became counter-productive to our family bonding moment. We therefore challenged ourselves to double down our efforts to promote gratitude. We found that, if we and our kids constantly were dwelling on what was wrong with our lives, the world, and each other, we were feeling anxious, empty and depressed. In the moments we took time to count our blessings and shift our mindsets to become happier, it made for a more grateful moment of interaction and we started seeing the good in our lives because we were actively looking for it.

So, we challenged ourselves to continue finding time in the evenings to practice Roses, Thorns and Roots. Before our daily reflective ritual relied on interactions with other people and environments outside of our family. However, like many others in this Covid era, we have found ourselves surrounded by one another with few opportunities to reflect on elements of the day that most of us were already aware of. So, we decided to build our reflections around three themes: learning online, relationships with parents and siblings, and reflecting on our environment. Below are some question prompts we have followed for the past few weeks:
1) What were some specific virtual successes (rose) you had today as a student in remote learning? What were some virtual challenges (thorn)? What did you learn today during your remote schooling that you found of particular interest (root)?

2) What were some specific positive interactions (rose) you had with one of your siblings or parents today? Did you find yourself frustrated with one of your siblings or parents (thorn) and, if so, how did you solve the problem (root)?

3) What did you enjoy about your environment today while you were working on the computer or playing (rose)? What are you finding to be frustrating about your environment (thorn) and are there ways we can solve these challenges (root)?

The results of these questions were interesting to us. We found that while we as parents were struggling with the work environment, our children were quite content sitting on the couch and interacting with their peers. Moreover, while we thought our children were struggling with making meaningful connections with their peers, the opposite seemed to be occurring. The results of these questions were interesting to us. We found that while we as parents were struggling with the work environment, our children were quite content sitting on the couch and interacting with their peers. Moreover, while we thought our children were struggling with making meaningful connections with their peers, the opposite seemed to be occurring.

Our children often shared humorous moments where they conversed with a peer about silly things happening at home, which they lit up about just as if they were still physically attending school. Even our kindergartener, who has never had a physical interaction with the kids in his classroom, reports stories about his friends and even has a best friend. They have big plans for sitting together at lunch and what they will be doing together on the playground someday.

Covid has resulted in a number of changes in the learning environment for our children and the working environment for us as parents. While it is easy to focus on the negative of the issue, we have found that by modifying the way we approach reflecting on our day, it helps bring focus to the more positive aspects of this era. Many times, with the modified roses, thorns and roots questions, we discover our children are actually quite fond of the time spent with one another, their peers in a virtual environment and the opportunity to work closely with us as parents. We, too, have noticed how rewarding it is to in real time watch our children learn and interact with their peers. By including this modified reflective Roses, Thorns and Roots practice, it has enabled us to continue the practice of positive reflection and thrive in a time of challenge.

Conflict Resolution

All of our relationships take extra attention right now. Conflict, unfortunately, happens easily.

While the US elections may be over, reading too much political news can (still) be bad for your health.

Here are several ways to think about how to navigate politics at family events during this holiday season:

• Have reasonable expectations.
• Don’t start the conversations and know how to end the conversations
• Be ready to be resilient.
For Those in the Helping Professions:

• If you are a health care worker, do you have your Emotional PPE? Please take care of yourself, too!
• If you are a retired health care worker, have you considered joining the New Mexico Medical Reserve Corps?
• Check out the New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership.
• The US Institute for Educational Sciences has created a site of evidence-based COVID-19-related educational resources.
• We’ve all had CPR and first aid training; how about Psychological First Aid?

What’s Next?

Food, Glorious Food! on December 16 -- Red chile on the mashed potatoes. Biscochitos. The tryptophan-induced nap. Setting up the extra tables and chairs. Nothing says Holidays quite like the food. And the gatherings with food. And the New Year’s Resolutions to shed all those holiday pounds. In December, the WASH will explore not only Holiday food but also the wellbeing and cultural aspects of food.

About WASH NM

The faculty and students of the Department of Individual, Family and Community Education in the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of New Mexico would like to offer to all New Mexicans thoughts, ideas, and resources from ourselves and our areas of study and work -- counseling, educational psychology, family & child studies, and nutrition -- to enlighten, soften, and aid the COVID-19-related transitions. We intend to make this offering monthly, each with a theme relevant to our times. With informed reflection and action throughout this time, we can all improve our Wellbeing at School and at Home in New Mexico.

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About IFCE

The department houses four diverse, but interconnected, programs that prepare students to address the myriad issues faced by the State of New Mexico. Our faculty members are leaders in their disciplines of Counselor Education, Educational Psychology, Family and Child Studies, and Nutrition; although each of these programs reflect different professional fields and identities, we all have shared values of human development, diversity, and excellence in scholarship and teaching. We offer various Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral Degrees and a number of programs have achieved national accreditations in their fields, a true marker of success and innovation.

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