

## Thriving During the Teenage Years – Adolescent Gratitude

By Jan Hittelman

Boulder Valley School District, March 2008

Q: I am concerned about my adolescent's frequent lack of gratitude or acknowledgement for all the things people do for and give to him. Is this normal teenage behavior? What can I do to encourage more graciousness? Sign me "Concerned Parent"

A: This is a common source of frustration for parents. We want our children to appreciate what they have and do a good job demonstrating that appreciation to others when appropriate. There are several factors which can help explain adolescents' apparent lack of gratitude:

- **Developmental factors:** The overarching developmental task of adolescence is to develop a sense of identity. By definition this requires a great deal of self-focus. Consequently, it is normal for adolescents to be very self-centered during this life stage and focus more on themselves than others.
- **Coded messages:** Adolescents often are very tough to understand in part because their overt behavior does not always reflect what's really going on inside. They may seem cocky, while actually feeling very insecure. They may say that they don't care what a parent thinks of their behavior, while in fact parental approval is more important than ever. And they may be more appreciative of those around them than they let on. These dynamics are very apparent to me when working with teens. Because of the inherent task of separating from parents and becoming a true individual, teens often don't want to admit these things to their parents.
- **Overindulgence:** With the best of intentions, most parents provide their children with an overabundance of material possessions, privileges, and assistance. The mistake is not necessarily in the providing these things but in not having them earn it. Thus it is no surprise that it can all be taken for granted.

Despite the developmental factors at work, there are effective ways that parents can foster a greater sense of gratitude in their children. Here are some suggestions:

- **Modeling:** Make sure that you are expressing your appreciation to your children (and others) when they are engaging in desired behaviors. As parents, we tend to provide a lot more negative than positive feedback. When providing feedback, be specific about the behaviors that you want to encourage.
- **Stop wasting rewards:** While we're good at connecting negative behavior to punishment, parents often provide their children with a wealth of positive possessions, activities, etc, without connecting any of it to their positive behaviors.
- **Catch them being appreciative:** If and when your children do show appreciation, make sure that you reinforce it by providing them with genuine positive feedback.

If all else fails, take heart in the fact that the vast majority of children successfully get through adolescence and often develop a variety of desired qualities including a sense of appreciation for what they have and the sensitivity to acknowledge their gratitude to others.

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### **Upcoming PEN Event:**

**March 6th<sup>h</sup>    How to Talk to Our Kids About Health Topics    9am – 11am Recycling Center**  
(1901 63<sup>rd</sup> Street, Boulder)

**Presenters:** Katy Fleming, BVSD Health Ed. Coordinator & Chet Chavez, BVSD Intervention Specialist

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*Learn more about PEN by visiting their website at: [www.parentengagementnetwork.com](http://www.parentengagementnetwork.com) or by contacting Betsy Fox with the Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance at 303-441-3981.*

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