

A 'thank you' goes a long way in family relationships

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You've probably heard that cultivating gratitude can boost your happiness. But in marriage and families, it's not just about being more

grateful for your loved ones—it's also important to feel appreciated by them. Researchers at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign have previously explored the positive impact of perceived gratitude from romantic partners on couples' quality of relationships. In a new study, they show the benefits of perceived gratitude also apply to parent-child relationships and can promote individuals' mental health.

The paper, "A 'Thank You' really would be nice: Perceived gratitude in family relationships," is [published](#) in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

"Some of my previous research has looked at gratitude in an interpersonal context, particularly between couples, and we've found that it's a pretty influential factor for various aspects of the relationship. Individuals who feel more appreciated by their partners are more confident, satisfied, and committed and less concerned about instability," said lead author Allen Barton, Illinois Extension specialist and assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at Illinois.

"In this study we wanted to explore perceived gratitude in the broader family context, and whether it makes a difference for individual and relationship well-being, and for parenting outcomes."

The study included data from a nationwide sample of 593 parents who were married or in a [romantic relationship](#) and had at least one child between the ages of 4 and 17. Participants answered questions about perceived gratitude from their spouse or partner and from their children, as well as items assessing psychological distress, parenting stress, and relationship satisfaction.

The researchers divided children into two age ranges—4 to 12 and 13 to 18—to account for developmental differences. Barton says teenagers

might be expected to have more awareness of what's going on in the family and what parents are contributing to their well-being. He notes that [young children](#) can still show gratitude, although they may express it differently.

Barton and co-author Qiujie Gong, a doctoral student in HDFS when the research was conducted, found that perceived gratitude from romantic partners resulted in better couple outcomes, but did not affect levels of parenting stress. In contrast, perceived gratitude from children—both older and younger—resulted in lower parenting stress but had no impact on couple relationship satisfaction. In addition to influencing family outcomes, they found that gratitude from romantic partners and older (but not younger) children was positively associated with individuals' psychological well-being.

Women, compared to men, reported lower levels of perceived gratitude from [romantic partners](#) and from [older children](#). Furthermore, higher levels of perceived gratitude from children provided beneficial effects for women only. That's consistent with prior research showing that women's contributions to the family are often less acknowledged by men than vice versa, Barton said.

"It's never 50/50 in any relationship and parents are going to be doing more than their kids, but nevertheless, our results highlight that making sure individuals' efforts for the family are acknowledged and appreciated by other family members is important. And conversely, there is clear evidence that a lack of feeling appreciated by the family members you're trying to help leads to negative outcomes for the family," he noted.

Barton said parents can foster an overall climate of gratitude in the family.

"As spouses and partners, we can express and show our gratitude for the other person, and we can teach children to express appreciation in developmentally appropriate ways. If you see your partner doing something really helpful for a child, you can remind that child to say 'thank you, mom' or 'thanks, dad' for what they just did. You can develop an ongoing way of thinking and a pattern of interaction that promotes gratitude—both giving and receiving—within the home," he said.

The researchers did not find any differences in terms of socio-demographic factors predicting perceived gratitude in various family relationships, indicating it appears at similar levels across a wide range of family types.

"As someone who studies family-based prevention programming, I am always trying to find research-based ways to build strong families, and expressing [gratitude](#) appears as one important means of doing that," Barton stated.

"There's a lot of work that goes into making 'family' happen—parenting, marriage, couple relationships, and so on—for any and every family. And when those efforts go unacknowledged or underappreciated, it takes a toll on individuals and families. We know the power of 'thank you' for couples, and this research shows it also matters for [parent-child relationships](#)."

More information: Allen W. Barton et al, A 'Thank You' really would be nice: Perceived gratitude in family relationships, *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2024.2365472](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2024.2365472)

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