

## The Most Valuable Lesson in the Aftermath of Hurricane Sandy

Everything was pretty mundane in the weeks before Hurricane Sandy. Everybody was busy running through their days, barely paying attention to things like shelter, electricity, gas, and heat. Then, in comes Hurricane Sandy, and suddenly everyone is forced to reevaluate what's important in life. Even as adults, many of us never stopped to consider how lucky we are to have the basic necessities we previously took for granted. Now, instead of focusing on getting more, all anybody wants is for things to be back to normal.

I watched a man who was interviewed on the news. His entire house was destroyed along with most of the things he owned. The reporter asked how he was managing. The man replied, "We're very lucky." When the reporter looked at him astonishingly, he replied, "My family was spared...we still have each other...others were not so lucky." This is one of the biggest lessons to be learned from the hurricane. No matter what you have lost, there is ALWAYS something to be grateful for.

The hurricane affected us in a variety of ways. Children witnessed extensive damage to their homes and neighborhoods. Some children experienced frightening periods of darkness and a sense of doom.

The abstract concept of gratitude comes with age and experience. However, it is never too early to start to teach and develop gratitude within our children. Gratitude is the opposite of entitlement. Entitlement makes us feel disappointed when we don't get what we want, rather than grateful when we receive something. Those who maintain an attitude of gratitude have been proven to have better sleep, stress management, stronger relationships, less depression, and fewer health related problems. Research has shown time and time again that children whose parents express gratitude on a regular basis are more enthusiastic, joyful, interested, and engaged in the world around them.

The most important way to start to teach children to appreciate what they have is through service to others that are less fortunate. The current situation is an open opportunity to begin this process. Some families have already started focusing on service by sheltering others or bringing food to friends, family, and strangers in need. If you have not as yet, there are many service functions you can perform as an immediate response to the hurricane. Have children go through their old clothes, coats, and toys for victims of the hurricane. Talk about how grateful you are to your neighbors that helped you weather the storm, or even how grateful you feel to have been able to help others. Make food and bake goodies with your children

and bring it to places where people are currently in need. Tell your children stories of resilient people who are rebuilding their lives and how people who seem to have lost so much are grateful for every little thing they have. Talk about our heroic first responders and let them know how grateful you are to the brave people who have dedicated their lives to saving others in a crisis. It's even more fun and memorable if you can get a group of your children's friends together for a community project. My children and some of their friends made donations of "blanket hugs". These are blankets wrapped up with tracings of your child's hands and arms, which adds a personal touch. For specific directions on how to make "blanket hugs" see [www.generationon.org/parents/project-ideas/blanket-hugs](http://www.generationon.org/parents/project-ideas/blanket-hugs).

On a daily basis, have children talk about things they are grateful for. This may be difficult for young children. You can start with a fill in the blank sentence such as, "How wonderful it is that \_\_\_\_\_". You can provide examples by focusing them on events, relationships, and the ability to have their basic needs met. Pay attention and catch yourself before you use phrases such as "I wish I had...". Instead, verbalize things that you are grateful for. Have your child buy donation items with you instead of shopping for these items while they are in school. This way they can witness firsthand what is being donated. Have your children take pictures of the beautiful things that surround them that they are grateful for (many i-touch and i-pads have built in cameras).

Soon things will be back to normal, back to the mundane. The hurricane pictures will last until the next big story appears. Don't let this opportunity pass. As things return to normal, let's create a new normal, filled with daily doses of gratitude. Use this disaster to start and continue the conversations and teachings of gratitude. It is perfect timing as we begin the holiday season to start a perpetual Thanksgiving by making gratitude a daily habit. It is a resiliency trait that can be taught just like any academic trait. Let's help our children take pleasure in their normal everyday lives, without taking any of it for granted.

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