



Cultivating Joy: The Power of *Hakarat HaTov*

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

"More juice, please!" demanded Leo, a very confident 3-year-old instructed me, as he held out his cup. "And quickly!"

I smiled, pouring his apple juice. "What do you say, Leo?"

He looked at me, then at his cup, then back at me. "More juice?" he tried again, a hopeful shrug as he waited, almost patiently.

It's a familiar scene in many early childhood settings, and many homes isn't it? Children are masters of expressing their wants, but often, the "thank you" can get a little lost in the excitement. Teaching gratitude, or *Hakarat HaTov* (הַכָּרַת הַטּוֹב) is one of the most profound gifts we can give our young learners. Literally it means "recognizing the good," and it's a powerful Jewish value that enriches every moment.

At the Early Learning Center, our "Big Idea" for kids is simple: **We say "thank you" and take time to notice all the good things we have.** It's more than just polite words; it's about cultivating an inner awareness of the blessings surrounding us, even in the smallest things.

Why is this so important for our littlest learners? Practicing *Hakarat HaTov* helps children develop empathy, build stronger relationships, foster resilience, and even boost their overall happiness. When children learn to appreciate what they have, rather than focusing on what they lack, they approach the world with a more positive and open heart.



So, how can you bring this beautiful concept to life in your home? Here are some of the ways to nurture gratitude:

1. **The Daily Gratitude Circle:** Each evening at dinner, go around the table, and each person shares one thing they are thankful for. It might be "my fuzzy blanket," "my friend Maya," or "the sunshine!" It's a beautiful way to end the day, shifting focus to appreciation.
2. **"Thank You" Collages:** What can you do with an afternoon without nap time in the summer? Art time becomes an opportunity for reflection! Children create "Thank You" collages using pictures from magazines, drawings, or photos of their family, friends, pets, and favorite things. As they glue, we talk about why each item makes them feel thankful. These collages become vibrant visual reminders of their blessings.
3. **Songs of Thanks:** Music is a universal language, and we love to sing songs about being thankful. Simple tunes about appreciating food, friends, teachers, and nature help embed the concept of gratitude in a joyful, memorable way. We might adapt familiar songs or learn new ones that explicitly use words like "thank you" or "grateful."
4. **Thanking The People in Your Lives:** Make it a point to thank the chef for the delicious challah you brought home for *Shabbat* or *saba* (grandpa) who read a bedtime story over FaceTime. Encourage children to say *todah* (thank you) directly to these individuals. This teaches them to recognize the efforts of others and express appreciation for their contributions to their *Kehillah* (community)..

By teaching our children to recognize the good, we're not just teaching them manners; we're helping them build a foundation for a life filled with joy, connection, and a deep appreciation for the world around them. And yes, Leo eventually learned to say "Thank you for the juice!" – often with a big, grateful smile.

What are you thankful for today? Share your thoughts in the comments below!

Shabbat Shalom.