

# A Pilot Study of a Tip-Enhanced Gratitude Journaling Intervention for Increasing Empathy in Third Graders

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## Abstract

Third graders from an urban elementary school were randomly assigned to keep either a gratitude journal or goal-setting journal for several weeks. Girls in the gratitude journaling group showed increases in empathy, but only when they received feedback on following journaling tips to promote deep-level grateful contemplation.

## Introduction

- Studies of gratitude interventions for children have mostly focused on well-being & helping behavior as outcomes & have involved primarily older children and adolescents (e.g., Froh et al., 2009; 2014). Studies of adults have shown that gratitude is associated with empathy (McCullough et al., 2002).
- The purpose of this study was to determine if a gratitude journaling intervention would lead to increases in third graders' empathy. We also tested whether this effect would depend on the gender of the child as studies have shown that girls tend to have higher levels of empathy (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983).

## Phase 1

### Method

- 32 third grade students from an urban elementary school

Gratitude Journal	Goal-Setting Journal (control)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x per week/5 weeks/ 5 things per entry</li> <li>• Tips to help with perspective taking &amp; empathic concern</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x per week/5 weeks/ 5 things per entry</li> <li>• Tips to identify barriers &amp; role models</li> </ul>

- Teachers rated students' empathy before & after the 5-week journaling period using the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) (Grisham & Elliott, 2008).

### Results

- The gratitude group did not show higher increases in empathy from pre to post compared to the control group.

## Phase 2

### Method

- Teacher feedback & inspection of the journals revealed that students struggled to write about 5 things in each entry & follow the tips.
- To emphasize quality over quantity, Phase 2 of the study was implemented with the following changes:
  - 1) Refresher lesson that reviewed the journaling tips
  - 2) Additional 5 weeks of journals – wrote about 3 things in each entry instead of 5
  - 3) Received feedback & individualized support following the tips
  - 4) Visual scaffolds added to the journaling tips
- Teacher ratings of students' empathy were again obtained at the end of this 5-week journaling period using the SSIS.

### Gratitude Tips, Examples, and Visual Scaffolds

What would life be like for people who do not have that benefit?

Put yourself in **THEIR** shoes



"I am grateful for my house, because it is warm. Some kids do not have houses and they are probably sad in the winter, because they are cold."

How did someone help you?



What did they have to give up to help you?



(This tip adapted from Froh et al., 2014)

"I am grateful for my mom, because she always makes me feel better when I have a nightmare and helps me go back to sleep. She gives up her own sleep to comfort me."

## Phase 2 Cont.

### Results

- Individual *t*-tests showed that girls' empathy significantly increased in the gratitude group, but not in the goal group (see Figure 1). Boys did not show significant increases in either group.

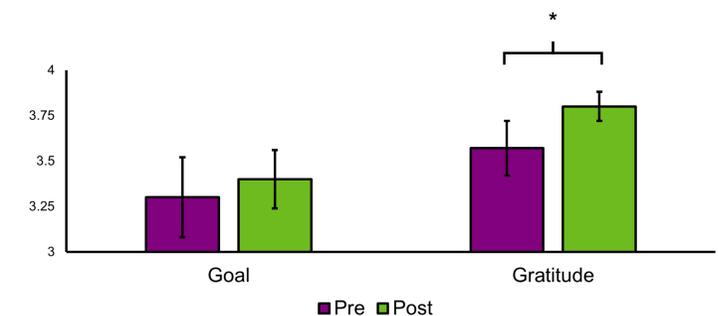


Figure 1. Increases in empathy for girls by journaling group.

## Discussion

- The results of both phases of this study suggest that gratitude journaling may promote empathy in females, but only when there is an emphasis on quality & deep-level grateful contemplation.
- Boys' empathy did not improve in either phase of this study.
- Future directions include replicating these results with a larger sample & investigating ways that this gratitude intervention might be further enhanced to benefit boys.

## References

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