

What do you say?

A dose of gratitude is what keeps Molly Gunn sane during the ups and downs of motherhood



The other day I found my two children so frustrating that I contemplated drinking at 8am. Seriously. We'd been up since dawn, and they were both screaming in each other's faces. I'd left my glass of wine from the evening before, half drunk, on the kitchen worktop and I eyed it, my mouth salivating. I knew it would help, but I also knew drinking it could be the start of a slippery slope – I don't want to be a lush. So I tipped it down the sink, threw open the doors to the garden and pushed them both outside instead.

It was then that I noticed the sun was shining. It was a lovely day. I was feeling frazzled, but I'd get over it. I wasn't a single mother, I only had to last until 4pm when my husband would be back. My kids were annoying but they didn't have major problems. They were healthy. I had a TV stacked with films, a car to go places, loads of food in the fridge... I wasn't bringing them up in the Third World. This made me feel better. It didn't stop them fighting for the rest of the day, but it did stop me focusing on the bad stuff.

We tell our kids to say thank you all the time, don't we? Almost automatically the words, "What do you say?" spill from our mouths if they're not immediately forthcoming with appreciation. I don't know about you, but I constantly remind my son that he should be grateful for what he has. So what if we parents practised what we preached a bit more?

"I don't do it enough," says Anna Whitehouse, founder of MotherPukka.co.uk, a website for "people who happen to be parents". Anna says,

'It has been a journey for me to realise the power I have to change my mindset'

"When that plastic bag breaks, your kid starts screaming blue murder and the cashiers start whispering, it's hard to realign the parenting stars. But I often look back at those moments and think, 'I got through that, the small human is alive, everyone's winning'. Sometimes it is easier to feel grateful after the event."

Of course there is a thin line between giving thanks for things, and denying yourself the right to feel annoyed and frustrated at whatever life and motherhood throws at you. "I feel very lucky compared to other mums around the world," says Sarah Wheatley of Birth and Beyond (birthandbeyond.org.uk) offering counselling and mentoring for pregnancy and parenthood. "It sounds trite, but it has been quite a journey for me to realise the power I have to change my mindset when I'm with my kids and a

big part of that is feeling grateful for how good I've got it. My children and I live in a relatively safe and stable country. When we hear about wars and natural disasters in other countries I immediately wonder how those mothers are able to look after their children."

Focusing on how good we've got it can do great things for lifting our spirits, but on the flip side we don't want to be so constantly positive that we resemble Princess Unikitty from *The Lego Movie*, who nearly internally combusts because she restricts herself to thinking Happy Thoughts. We don't want to be that over-positive person who is grating to those around us, adding #SoBlessed after social media updates (pass the sick bucket). Then, being grateful just sounds like boasting.

"I am a huge advocate for women and mums being honest about how difficult life can be but

I think it's important not to get carried away," says Rachel Hunter, a former child clinical psychologist who writes a blog about being a mother with MS (memsandbeingmum.wordpress.com). "It seems that like most things in life, it is 'both-and', which means it is both amazingly wonderfully precious, and bloody hard. So, yes finding a healthy balance has to be the best way forward."

But we all know that simply feeling balanced is easier said than done. For instance, how do we 'look on the bright side' when we're covered in baby sick, we've had two hours sleep, and the toddler breaks a glass on the kitchen floor? "There is definitely a balance to be found: there is a difference between healthily venting feelings and continually wallowing in them. Sometimes we have to choose to see things differently. If you're finding it difficult to let go of feelings of frustration, even after sharing them with others, then it might help to talk with a counsellor or psychotherapist," says Sarah.

But if things are just run of the mill bad? "I think it is important to have close friends who you can be open and honest with... and who will also tell you to shut up moaning and be grateful!" says Rachel.

Talking to our friends can do us the world of good – ideally in the flesh or on the phone, rather than via social media. But another way to feel more grateful is to focus our energies on something bigger than us... like creating a campaign. Anna Whitehouse has launched a #ParentFail campaign raising money for kids charity Right to Play, while for me, the big gratitude mindset shift came about through Selfish Mother's #MotherTee campaign,

supporting female survivors of war via Women for Women International. Receiving updates on our 35 sponsored sisters (so far) makes me hugely grateful that I'm not living in a war-torn country, I'm not widowed, and I can read, write and earn a living. And also I have the power to help them. We've now launched kid's t-shirts in aid of Kids Company to extend the gratitude vibe.

It might be hard to do it all the time, but focusing on the good stuff can help us see that it's not all bad, even on the darkest days. So, if the next time your two year old is having a major hysterical breakdown because you've cut up his banana (as mine did this morning), and then you spill the last of the coffee, and your car has broken down... take a second to find five things you're grateful for and I guarantee it will make you feel a little better. Then pour a glass of wine... just maybe not at 8am.

● Molly Gunn is editor of *Selfish Mother*, a site she created for like-minded women in 2013

'It is important to have close friends who you can be honest with'

THREE TIPS FOR FEELING THE LOVE

INNER CRITIC

Recognise when you're hearing any kind of critical voice inside yourself and then imagine yourself turning the volume down a bit. That can allow a bit more space for you to hear more positive voices. (Sarah Wheatley)

BE PRESENT

Bit random but sometimes I just stop and sing (in my head or out loud) the song *There's no place I'd rather be* just to remind myself, really? where else is more important than being here. With your family. (Rachel Hunter)

LAUGH OUT LOUD

Find mothers with a sense of humour. Sharing the odd failure here and there then allows those moments of success to shine through – whether it is simply getting out of the house without a Cheerio stuck to your left lapel or managing to make it to one of the amazing Mothers Meetings business clubs. (Anna Whitehouse)



PHOTOGRAPHS SHUTTERSTOCK; DITTY ABOUT SUMMER, IRVINGUSTIN