

# Opinions

MY TURN BECKY JACKSON

## The value of teaching kids empathy, gratitude



Our youth at ICAN face many harsh realities – living in poverty, surrounded by crime.

It's a tough way to grow up and we do our best to create a nurturing environment that gives youth the skills to make good choices for themselves.

These kids come to ICAN for free, and each holiday season they get the chance to feel pretty special because our generous community throws them holiday parties and gives them gifts. This is a wonderful thing, but our prevention specialists noticed something interesting – a sense of entitlement and lack of gratitude.

Yes, the youth at ICAN are like any other youth – they struggle with these skills. Shower them with holiday gifts and they may just want more (and not even say “thanks!”)

It was upsetting, and our team decided to do something about it.

### Lessons in empathy and gratitude

Empathy and gratitude are extremely important. We teach life skills, decision making and goal setting to prevent substance abuse, gang activity and juvenile delinquency. We decided that empathy and gratitude are just as critical.

An article from *New York Parenting* talks about these skills. Gratitude (which is self-focused) is when a person focuses on the positives in their life, which can result in personal happiness, optimism, lack of stress and satisfaction.

Empathy (which is other-centered) is when you see life through the lens of others, which is a skill in building healthy relationships and a better desire to help and share. These skills are some of the greatest predictors for how successful a child will be in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, youth today lack these skills. An article from *Scientific American* analyzes a study that concludes that almost 75 percent of students today rate themselves as less empathic than the average student 30 years ago.

So what are we doing to teach our ICAN youth these skills?

### Helping others helps us

We instituted a service learning pro-



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gram. Youth work with our staff to choose projects where they go out in the community and give back to others who might also be in need.

For example, we had some veterans and active duty military representatives come talk to our kids about service – what they do, what service means. They told them that they miss their kids when they are away but that it's important for them to do this to keep all of us safe. Our youth then wrote letters of thanks to service men and women and sent those letters overseas.

We also started a “friendship coalition” with the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs – making and giving friendship bracelets to their youth who are in a similar situation to ICAN youth.

Our most recent project was making and decorating blankets for a local domestic violence shelter.

One of our teens helped with the project and he asked me, “Ms. Becky, do other people do stuff like this for us?” His question made me smile – the dots were connecting and the circle of gratitude began its completion. We want our kids to experience the tangible benefits of empathy and gratitude.

### How to help

How can you get involved in this program?

We are often looking for small, in-kind donations for our projects. Follow ICAN on Facebook for updates on items needed.

Or maybe you have an idea for a great project that promotes gratitude. Let us know, Call 480-821-4207 or email [info@icanaz.org](mailto:info@icanaz.org). We would love to hear from you.

Becky Jackson is president and CEO of ICAN: Positive Programs for Youth in Chandler.

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