

DON'T BE AFRAID TO Praise

By Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

Praise is powerful. It helps guide children through the small steps it takes to master new skills, motivate them to stay with difficult tasks, and build the self-confidence to take risks and grow into creative, self-reliant individuals. Research has repeatedly shown that not praising (or paying attention to) good behavior often leads to misbehavior and poor self-esteem.

Yet, some parents and teachers worry that praise will have negative side effects, such as making children overly dependent on adult approval. Let's look at some common concerns which, in my view are based on misconceptions. Then we'll look at ways to praise effectively.

"My child should know how to behave. Surely I don't need to praise everyday things like doing chores or sharing toys."

The only way a child learns to repeat a particular behavior is by having it reinforced. If it is recognized by the parent — through any form of attention, verbal or nonverbal — it is more likely to occur again. If it is ignored, it will disappear sooner or later.

"Isn't it manipulative to use

praise to bring about a particular behavior?"

"Manipulative" implies contriving secretly, against the child's wishes. The purpose of praise is to increase positive behavior with the child's knowledge. Praise communicates that certain behavior is desirable. This is being "out front," not manipulative.

"Won't praise spoil my child? Won't he learn to cooperate only for adult approval?"

Children are not spoiled by praise. Rather than becoming more dependent on authority figures, they become more self-reliant because they believe in themselves. They are also more likely to praise others — and this can have far-reaching effects. Of course, the opposite is also true: if children receive frequent negative and critical messages, they'll internalize these ideas and deliver them to their peers as well.

"I make a point of encouraging my child. Isn't that enough?"

Some parents and teachers believe they should encourage children but not praise them, (often they're worried about spoiling or ending up with children who work only for external rewards). They make sup-

portive comments but edit out statements that sound like praise. But children aren't likely to notice the difference. If they don't differentiate, why should we? Instead of worrying about the form your statement takes, simply focus on giving encouragement or praise whenever you see positive behaviors.

"I save my praise for something really outstanding — an A in math, a perfectly made bed, or a really good drawing. Doesn't this help a child reach for the top?"

This attitude ignores the process; no one achieves something outstanding without taking many (non-outstanding) steps along the way. We need to support the process of trying to make that bed and working all those math problems on the path to an A. Children who are only praised for outstanding achievement usually quit trying before they reach it.

"If I make a conscious effort to praise him, I feel phony."

Praise may seem phony at first — any new behavior feels awkward in the beginning. The more you use praise, the more natural it will sound.

"Whenever I try to praise my child, he throws it back in my face. It's almost as if he doesn't want me to praise him."

Temperamentally difficult and aggressive children can be hard to praise. Their behavior often makes parents angry and undermines the desire to be positive. To make matters more difficult, they may reject praise. They seem to have internalized a negative self-concept; when parents present them with an alternative view, they find it difficult to accept. Yet, difficult children need praise even more than others. Constantly look for posi-

tive behaviors to reinforce until your child begins to internalize some positive self-concepts.

PRAISING EFFECTIVELY

Many people do not know how or when to give praise and encouragement. Perhaps they received little praise when they were young and the words seem awkward and artificial, or they don't know what behaviors to praise.

Often parents who don't praise their children don't praise themselves either. If they listened to their internal "self-talk," they wouldn't hear things like "You're doing a good job of disciplining Johnny," or "You handled that conflict calmly and rationally." Instead, they are quick to criticize themselves.

Those of us who are not in the habit of positive "self-talk" (or are too much in the habit of self-criticism) can learn to praise ourselves. Then we will be more likely to do the same for our children. Praise and encouragement can have a dramatic impact on children's behavior. Here are some guidelines.

1 Be Specific: Specific or "labeled" praise describes the behavior you like. Instead of saying "Good job," you would say, "I'm pleased that you are remembering to feed the dog every day," or "I've noticed that you are making fewer spelling errors in your homework assignments."

2 Show Enthusiasm: Smile, make eye contact, give a pat on the back. Praise should be stated with energy and sincerity; words thrown carelessly over the shoulder will be lost on the child.

Caution: If giving praise feels difficult or you are not used to it, it may sound phony or boring initially. That's to be expected. Genuine positive feelings

will come as you use praise more often. Here are a few phrases to help you get started:

- I like it when you...
- It really pleases me when you...
- You're doing just what I asked you to do.
- Hey, you are really sharp, you...
- I'm very proud of you for...
- Thank you for...
- That's a perfect way of...
- Wow, what a wonderful job you've done of...

3 Praise Appropriately: It would not be appropriate to praise Jeffrey for sharing his video games with Joshua when Nintendo has been declared off limits by Joshua's parents. Giving praise when a child behaves inappropriately is misleading and confusing. Wait for something more constructive, then praise that positive behavior.

4 Praise Immediately: While delayed praise is better than none, the most effective praise is given within five seconds of the positive behavior. If you're trying to encourage a new behavior, watch for every time it starts to happen. Don't wait for the clothes to be put on perfectly or the toys all put away. Praise your children as soon as they begin the desired behavior. The praise should be frequent and consistent in the beginning, then gradually more intermittent.

5 Don't Combine Praise With Commands or Criticisms: Without realizing it, some people undermine praise by combining it with a command (or a criticism!) A parent might say, "You came to the table the first time I asked. That's great. But from now on, how about washing your face and hands first?" Or perhaps, "I'm glad you're making your bed, but

why didn't you do it yesterday?" Praise should be clear and unequivocal, without reminders of prior failures or requests for future performance.

DOUBLING THE IMPACT

Reinforcing a new behavior is a long and difficult task. Whether you're using attention, a hug, a smile, or verbal praise, try to reinforce the positive behavior every time it occurs. If there are two adults in your family, discuss which behavior you want to improve and how you will try to reinforce it. With both participating, the learning will occur more quickly. In addition, adults can double the impact by praising children in front of other adults. ■

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- Catch your child being good — don't save praise for "perfect" behavior.
- Don't worry about spoiling your children with praise.
- Increase praise for difficult children.
- Give specific praise.
- Praise with smiles, eye contact and enthusiasm.
- Praise only appropriate behavior.
- Praise immediately.
- Praise in front of other people.
- Model self-praise.