

Praise

What is Praise?

The seemingly simple idea of praise has joined the long list of parenting concerns where conflicting advice can lead to confusion. Some parents believe that it's important to praise children in order to encourage them, while others worry that if they over-praise children, they will become spoiled. What's a parent to do?

The basic principle of effective praise is the practice of encouraging children by focusing on their efforts rather than their outcomes in order to build self-confidence and feelings of self-worth. Praise helps children understand that their efforts are appreciated, not just their accomplishments.

Developmental Stages

When praising a child, it is important to be aware of the child's developmental level.

INFANTS: Praising infants often takes the form of gestures such as smiling, hugging, holding, and clapping rather than words. As babies get older, they benefit from praise that encourages them to safely explore their environment.

TODDLERS: Praise that encourages exploration is most helpful to toddlers. Research tells us that 3-year old children are more likely to tackle challenges – and to persist at a task – when their mothers had praised and encouraged their independence at age two.

PRESCHOOLERS: Encourage your preschooler to try appropriate and challenging tasks, such as putting on shoes and socks; acknowledge his effort as well as his success.



Why Praise Matters

Praise matters because it focuses on your child's assets and strengths in order to build their self-confidence and feelings of worth.

- ★ Children want very much to please their parents; therefore, praise can be a powerful reward. Many experts believe that praise gives a child a deep feeling that he or she is worthwhile, loved, and a good person.

What Parents Can Do

The trickiest thing about praise is that not all praise is “good;” in fact, some types of praise can even have adverse effects on your child. For parents, it’s important to understand the difference between effective and ineffective praise.

INEFFECTIVE PRAISE: What not to do

- ★ **Don’t overdo it.** A common type of ineffective praise is overdone praise, such as a telling a child “You’re the best swimmer in the whole world.” Even very young children can become suspicious of this inauthentic praise, causing them to distrust the person giving the praise.
- ★ **Don’t use praise with double messages.** For example: “Good job putting your shoes on – I don’t know why you can’t put them on every time without me asking.” These double messages hurt a child’s feelings and make him feel criticized.
- ★ **Don’t criticize.** Criticism, which is making a negative comment about a person or their actions from a position of power, is a delicate matter for parents. One simple way to manage this tricky area is to distinguish between criticism and feedback. In general, comments about the person are considered criticism, whereas comments about an event are more easily understood as feedback. Example of criticism:



“You should know how to put your shoes on by yourself.”
Feedback would be: “Look at your shoes. How can you tell if your shoe is on the correct foot?”

- ★ **Don’t use “global” criticisms.** Children do need correction from time to time, but “global” criticism, such as “You’re always mean to your sister,” does not help the child learn and can affect how the child views him or herself. Global criticism can make a child think “Well, if I am always mean, why should I even try to be nice?” A child who gets immediate, specific feedback is more likely to think, “I made a mistake this time, but next time I can do better.”

EFFECTIVE PRAISE: What to do

- ★ **Praise effort and practice.** For example, “You worked hard to put your shoes on, and you did it!”
- ★ **Give praise as soon as possible.** Praise that follows right after a positive behavior has a stronger effect than delayed praise.
- ★ **Be specific.** General praise, such as “Good job,” doesn’t help the child know what you liked or what was done well. Instead of “Good job,” try “You picked up every toy off the floor in your room, and it looks nice and clean.”
- ★ **Be genuine.** If you are excited by your child’s efforts, let her know. Your child knows when your tone and intensity match your evaluation of the effort.
- ★ **Use feedback that is connected to your feelings.** It’s good for your child to know that you have feelings about what she does. Saying “It makes me happy when you help your brother clean up” connects more deeply with her than just a simple “Thanks.”
- ★ **Have realistic expectations.** Parents must also remember to have age-appropriate expectations for children; this can be especially tricky in families with more than one child. For example, what is expected of one child often cannot be expected of the other. A simple task, such as putting toys away, means something entirely different for a toddler than it does a preschooler. Parents should be mindful of this when praising both children – perhaps thanking the older child for picking up all the toys, while complimenting the effort of the younger child, even though his results were not likely as successful.