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Why "Good Job!" Can Be Bad News

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Parents often praise their children to reinforce positive behaviors. You will hear parents say, "Good girl!" and, "You're so smart – I'm proud of you!" But using praise can actually be discouraging to children. If your daughter engages in an inappropriate behavior, does that mean that she is "bad?" If your son gets a less than stellar grade does that mean he is "dumb" or that mom isn't proud of him anymore? Of course that is not what parents intend, but that is what children may think when they are praised for their performance and evaluated by others.

The Praise Junkie

Children who are praised excessively run the risk of being "people pleasers," constantly seeking someone to critique their performance and validate their worth with praise. When children hear, "That's terrific!" or, "You're the best!" all the time, the words quickly become empty and meaningless. The phrase, "I'm so proud of you!" implicitly suggests that the child's responsibility is to keep someone else happy, regardless of how the child feels about her own efforts. Children may feel shame and embarrassment when they can't continue at a high level of performance, or they may live their childhood feeling stressed and anxious trying to live up to someone else's standards.

So, what are parents supposed to do? Bite their tongues and never say anything positive to their children? Of course not! Just choose your words carefully. Instead of praising your child for a job well done, use words of encouragement whenever you notice your child putting forth noteworthy effort.

Encouragement vs. Praise

Praise and encouragement are often used interchangeably, but they are different. Let's take a close look at the definitions of these words.

Praise: 1. To express warm approbation of, commendation for, or admiration for. 2. To extol or exalt; worship.

Encourage: 1. To inspire with hope, courage or confidence; hearten. 2. To give support to; foster. 3. To stimulate; spur. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

Praise is a reward given by parents once the child has earned it. In other words, it is result-oriented and is given only after a positive outcome has been achieved (e.g. getting a good grade on a test or batting in the winning run). It is frequently used as a tool for controlling and manipulating the child. When Dad says, "You are such a good boy!" he is hoping to motivate his son to repeat a behavior that Dad has decided is admirable. Unfortunately, children often focus on the negative implication of praise – that failure to achieve the desired behavior means the child must be a bad person.

| Praise is: |
|---|
| Focused on the person, performance or perfection Conditional * General * An external motivator |
| Encouragement is: |
| Focused on effort * Unconditional * Detailed An internal motivator |

Encouragement, in contrast, does not need to be earned. It is not a reward conditioned on a positive result or outcome. Parents can be encouraging even if the child has not succeeded, because the focus is on the outcome. Parents can be encouraging even if the child has not succeeded, because the focus is on the effort or the progress and not the end result. When Dad says, "Thanks, Junior, for helping me take out the garbage," it encourages the child. Even if Junior dropped four pieces of trash on the floor, he and Dad can clean them up together, and Dad can still appreciate and encourage Junior's effort.

Types of Encouragement

There are three types of encouragement (verbal, behavioral and situational) that are great additions to your parenting tool belt.

Verbal encouragement is a statement about the child's accomplishments, efforts or progress. It describes, in detail, what you see. So, rather than saying something vague such as, "You are such a good kid!" say, "I notice that you are setting the table without even being asked to do so. Thank you." A Washington, D.C., mom, who recently replaced her vague "attaboys" with more meaningful words of encouragement, says that verbal encouragement always elicits more information from her children. "When I make specific remarks about my child's behavior or progress, it starts a verbal volley. And that leads to more closeness, which is what I want as a parent." Another way to encourage a child verbally is to enter her world and recognize her feelings. Although you may not think it's a big deal not to be invited to a social event, your daughter might be quite upset when her invitation to Hannah's birthday party never arrives. Rather than belittle her hurt ("Don't cry, honey, it's okay."), honor her feelings by saying, "You are sad that Hannah didn't invite you to her party." Such communication develops trust between parent and child and leads to more meaningful conversation.

The second type of encouragement is behavioral, which uses your physical presence and body language to communicate with your child. We all know that smiles, hugs and other displays of affection have a positive effect, but there are other ways to encourage. First, minimize the distance between you and your child. Get down to her eye level and use a touch on the shoulder to get her attention. Keep your body language accepting and open. Private signals or signs communicate warmth.

Situational encouragement, the third type, gives the child opportunities that support her growth and development. Children need to be exposed to new and challenging activities. During those times, encourage your child by supporting her efforts and allowing her to take the lead. For example, if your child drops a few apples while carrying groceries in from the car, acknowledge her efforts ("Thanks for carrying the groceries into the house. I appreciate your help.") rather than scolding her for her mishap ("Oh, no! You've bruised the apples!").

Encouragement fortifies children with a healthy dose of recognition for their efforts and progress. By putting verbal, behavioral and situational encouragement into practice, you'll provide your child with an internal motivation to engage in positive behaviors.

Some encouraging things to say to a child:

Instead of . . .

Say . . .

"Good girl!"

"Look at you! You climbed that tree all by yourself."

"You drew a beautiful picture!"

"I noticed that you used a lot of blue and yellow. Tell me more about your drawing."

"I'm so happy you are Mommy's little helper!"

"I appreciate your help carrying in the groceries."

"You got an A! I'm proud of you!"

"Your hard work resulted in an A!"

"Cool project!"

"You built a volcano out of clay that is almost three feet high. How did you make it so tall?"

"You are so smart!"

"You figured out how to solve that crossword puzzle all by yourself."

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