

What Every Parent Needs to Know About Praise

"An impressive body of scientific research has shown that the more we reward people for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Now the point isn't to draw, to read, to think, to create – the point is to get the goody, whether it's an ice cream, a sticker, or a 'Good job!'"-- Alfie Kohn



If you think you should always praise your child, you may be surprised to hear that research shows that praise--at least as we usually give it to children in this culture-- often backfires. To be clear, I'm not saying to withhold your love, ever. I'm suggesting that we all become a bit more thoughtful about how we give children feedback. Here's why.

It's well-established that kids who receive money for grades stop taking joy in a job well done and operate in single-minded pursuit of the monetary reward, even to the point of being more likely to cheat. And praise, given its potency as a reward, has similar effects to tangible rewards. So studies show that:

- Kids who are praised for reading learn that reading isn't inherently rewarding -- so they're *less* likely to read independently.
- Kids who are praised for eating vegetables learn that vegetables aren't inherently delicious -- they need to come with a spoonful of sugar in the form of praise.
- Kids who are praised for sharing begin to share less when they think adults aren't watching, because they have apparently learned from the praise that no one in their right mind would share out of the goodness of their heart.

This doesn't mean you can't give your child positive feedback. All children need that. It's how we do it that matters. Let me explain.

Most parents know that negative judgements undermine children, and at least try to bite their tongue instead of saying "*What?! Are you an idiot?!*"

But positive judgements like "*What a smart boy!*" also sabotage children. Unfortunately, children don't feel they have any control over that quality, and they don't know how to improve it. So children who are told they're smart often get worried. They know their smarts are limited--there is so much they don't know! They don't want to disprove our opinion, so they avoid situations in which they may not appear so smart, such as learning new things they might have to work at. When they have to work hard at something, they assume that means they aren't smart. So they often simply give up at a task they could master with a little effort.

Maybe worst of all, studies show that kids who are praised a lot conclude that someone is constantly evaluating their performance. They become more insecure about expressing their own ideas and opinions, worried about whether they will measure up. Praise teaches children that their value is evaluated from outside, so they lose the ability to take pleasure in their accomplishments unless someone else tells them "Good Job."

So conventional praise:

- **Makes it less likely that children will independently practice the behaviors they are praised for.**
- **Undermines kids' self-confidence.**
- **Turns them into praise junkies by teaching them to look for outside feedback to feel okay.**
- **Robs kids of their joy in their accomplishments.**
- **Keeps kids from applying themselves for fear they won't live up to the praise.**

But that doesn't mean you can't engage positively with your child. All children need and thrive on our unconditional positive regard. That's just a fancy way of saying that all children need to feel seen--really seen for who they are--as well as appreciated and encouraged. For instance:

1. Empathize with his excitement.

"Wow, look at you pedaling all by yourself!"

2. Notice your child and let her know you're really seeing her.

"I see that you're doing the sides of the puzzle first."

3. Be specific in your description.

"You counted from zero to twenty!"

4. Empower by pointing out the results of her behavior.

"Look how happy your friend is to have a turn with your toy."

5. Ask questions to help your child reflect and let him be the one to evaluate.

"Do you like the way it came out? Why or why not?"

6. Encourage effort rather than results.

"You're working so hard on that....Just a little more practice and you'll nail it!"

7. Express your own feelings, including gratitude.

"I love it when we work as a team like this! Thanks so much for helping me."

Notice the difference? You're not judging your child. You're loving him. As Deepak Chopra says, *"Love is attention without judgment. In its natural state, attention only appreciates."* That's the kind of attention every child needs.
