

The Trouble with Praise

"Good job." "Good girl." "Good boy." Those are phrases that are easily spoken when we want to praise something a child has done. The praise might be aimed at a piece of paper with crayon scribbles on it, the required task of putting the dolls back in the toy chest, or even the fact that the child ate all of the food on her plate. We are pleased with what the child has accomplished and we want to communicate that pleasure to the child. We may also offer the praise as a form of positive reinforcement believing that the child will want to scribble with crayons again, put her dolls away more willingly, and clean her plate more often in order to here our praise repeated in the future. In other words, our "good job" or "good girl" serves as a form of reward for the behavior and once rewarded, we assume that the behavior will be repeated.

If praise reinforces and rewards appropriate behavior and is relatively easy to use, why then do some people think there are problems with its overuse? There are basically two reasons why some people who work in the fields of education and child development feel that we need to be cautious about our use of praise. The first reason has to do with a child's "focus of attention." The child using crayons to create drawings on a piece of paper should receive his reward from his own accomplishment. The concern with praise is that there is the possibility that the child will begin to work for the praise and not for the intrinsic enjoyment and learning benefits of the activity. We see this happening in classrooms when children rush through an activity to receive the reward that is given them for completing the activity. The child isn't working towards what he can gain from the activity but rather towards what he can gain from the reward system.

The second reason is that simply praising or rewarding a child doesn't provide any meaningful feedback to the child about what he has done. What was it about the crayon drawing that was interesting? His use and combination of colors? The way he left some white space around the edges of the drawing? The fact that he drew the images of his family members according to their size relationships? Just saying "good job" doesn't help the child think about what he did and doesn't provide him with any perspective about how he might think about his artwork in the future.

Many of us can think back to a time in high school or perhaps college when he worked hard on an essay assignment and received an excellent grade

for it but were frustrated that the teacher didn't make any substantive comments about what we had done. We were happy to get the good grade and weren't going to "give it back" but the good grade - the praise - didn't satisfy us. We wanted the teacher to provide some feedback that would indicate he actually paid attention to the writing we had produced. We wanted to know why the essay was good; the letter 'A' or a 'check plus' at the top of the paper didn't give us any specific information about our talents as an essay writer.

A little praise every now and then is not going to hurt a child. But if that is all he hears he may have his attention drawn away from a focus on the activity itself and he may not be learning what it really means to do a "good job."

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