

# THE POWER OF PRAISE

## Separating genuine praise from adult judgement

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**Praise is a powerful pedagogical strategy for communicating with young children as it reinforces positive attributes and behaviours.**

In the past, it was commonly assumed that praise would spoil children and that criticism and disapproval would strengthen children's character and turn them into good citizens. In reality, this method served only to **surpress creative energy; damage self-esteem** and leave children feeling that they could not put anything of themselves into the world unless they were sure it would meet with someone's else's approval.

Today, the use of praise is considered to be '**self-esteem building**', accepting that self-esteem is the root of intrinsic motivation, resillience and mental well-being.

**However, there is a flip side to this argument.** What we sometimes fail to realise is that, because children value the opinion of adults so highly, frequent evaluative comments, even when positive, can foster **undue dependence on the external judgement of others**. This can cause children to devalue their own perceptions about their competence and capabilities. **Used loosely, praise loses its potency and becomes empty and meaningless.**



### Genuine Praise

So how can educators and parents ensure that positive comments to children are **meaningful, effective and non-judgemental**?

The secret is ensuring that praise is **genuine**. Genuine praise comments tell children how and what positive behaviours look like - **regardless of the performance level**.

When educators and parents use this technique, children feel that their behaviours and their sense of self are validated. **This is built on the idea that children deserve confirmation, not approval from adults.**

**The next section contains the 3 main components of genuine praise including some practical examples of genuine praise comments.**

### Praise for Babies and Toddlers

Praise for babies and toddlers follows the **same principles** as with older children- albeit praise is more reliant on **facial expression, smiling and physical gestures like hand clapping**.

Babies and toddlers will respond to **positive adult interactions** thereby reinforcing the behaviour and encouraging the child to **repeat the action or communication**.

Regardless of the child age or verbal ability, adults should **verbalise praise** in a **descriptive, well-timed way**.

## 1. Praise effort and process, not achievement or ability

When children are **praised for their efforts** in doing a task, they learn to **attribute success to their efforts**.

Because effort is a quality that we all have the **power to control and improve**, children will therefore focus more on putting in the effort to practice or develop skills than on pursuing results.

This nurtures **resilience and a growth mindset** which encourages children to believe in **practicing to improve** rather than giving up because they feel incapable.

Below are a few examples of how praise can be disingenuous towards the child and some more effective examples:

'You are so smart – you are a genius' ...instead try  
**'That was a great solution to the problem' .. or**  
**'You found an excellent solution there'.**

'You are an angel, great girl' .. instead try **'It's really kind of you to share'** or **'Great sharing from Lily today'**.

'Fantastic boy' .. instead try **'You concentrated so well when you were working on the group collage'**.



## 2. Be specific and descriptive

Instead of sweeping words of encouragement, praise children using **descriptive and specific** words. The less general or generic the encouragement, the more likely it is factually correct and perceived as sincere.

Instead of 'Great job/Good boy/Well done', **be specific**. Use statements that begin with **'you'** or **'I'** and a description of what you saw the child doing.

**Below are some examples of descriptive praise comments:**

'I saw you carry all the dirty paint brushes to the sink, Tomas. I really appreciate your help'

'You had to make three trips to the sink to get all the dirty paint brushes. You have been a great help today'

'You chose so many beautiful colours for your picture'

'I really like the way you stacked all the blocks in a high tower'

'You were so careful when you stacked the blocks and see how tall it is'

'You decided to hang up the dress up clothes– look how tidy it looks now'

'You have used such kind words when helping Matthew'.





### 3. Avoid praise for easy tasks or over-praise

**Over praise** or praising easy tasks can have **negative impacts**. At the very least, overpraising easy tasks is insincere. Doing so can have two types of impact on a child's self-esteem.

For children who have **low self-esteem**, inflated praise can lower these children's motivation and sense of self-worth and leave them **reliant on praise**.

For children with **high self-esteem**, inflated praise does not lower self-esteem, but can **cultivate narcissism**. This can leave children feeling superior to others, believing they are entitled to privileges and want to be admired.

**Frequent praising** also leads children to believe the absence of praise **signifies failure**.

#### Praise as a behaviour improvement technique

Children who display challenging behaviour may **need encouragement and praise far more than other children who are receiving it already**.

Criticising a child will not change unwanted behaviours. Rather it can damage a child's confidence and ability to change; can leave the child upset and **gives attention to the unwanted behaviour**.

What is more effective is to **highlight examples of positive behaviours that are observed**. There is a simple rule in psychology that what we give our attention to grows in significance. Parents and educators should use this rule to their advantage and notice the times when the opposite of the unwanted behaviour occurs.

For example, if you are concerned about a child repeatedly fighting with other children, **notice and comment on the times they get along with another child, or they start to share and encourage this instead**.

To avoid overpraising or sounding insincere, the best way is to use words of encouragement spontaneously when they are not expected. Compliment something **unexpectedly and genuinely**.

It is also important to remember that **you do not have to** praise every positive action to help children feel motivated.



#### A summary of tips:

**Name the behaviour you want to reinforce** ("You put the puzzle back on the shelf when you finished, now someone else can play with it")

**Focus on specific attributes of the child's work rather than on the piece in general** ("You have used some beautiful colours in your picture")

**Emphasise the process, not the product** ("Can you show me how you made your tower so high?")

**Help children appreciate their own behaviour and achievements to please themselves rather than others** ("You must feel very proud of the way you shared your pencils with Sam")

**Be spontaneous.** The benefits of praising a child can disappear if it is expected.

**Appreciating children can take many forms.** You can also encourage a child physically, e.g. **give them a big hug, high-five, or pat on the back** to acknowledge their behaviour or achievements.



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