

Praise is NOT Encouraging to Children

"Good job!" is the worst kind of praise. Jim Taylor Ph.D. adapted by TPC 2014

What is the most common praise you hear parents (and teachers and coaches) giving kids at home, on the playground, in class, and on the sports fields? "Good job!" "Good boy/girl" (and other variants such as "Way to go," "Nice job," and "That's great") have become such knee-jerk reactions from parents whenever their kids do something worthy of acknowledgment that we don't even hear what we are saying any longer.

What's the problem with "Good job?" Well, it's lazy praise, it's worthless praise, it's harmful praise. It has no value to children, yet parents have been led into thinking that it will build their children's self-esteem

Let's start with the purpose of praise: to hope children will continue to engage in positive behaviors that produce positive outcomes. Now you can start to see the problems with "good job!" First, it lacks specificity. It doesn't tell children what precisely they did well, and without that information they can't know exactly what they should do in the future to get the same outcome. Second, "good job!" only focuses on the outcome rather than the process.

The reality is that children don't need to be told "good job!" when they have done something well; it's self-evident. **They DO need to be told how they did well** so they can replicate that behavior in the future to get the same positive outcome.

Research has found that children who were **praised** for their intelligence, as compared to their effort, **became overly focused on results**. "*Praising children for intelligence makes them fear difficulty because they begin to equate failure with stupidity.*"

Research has also found that students who were lavished with praise were more cautious in their responses to questions, had less confidence in their answers, were less persistent in difficult assignments, and less willing to share their ideas.

Children develop a sense of competence by **seeing the consequences of their actions, not by being told** about the consequences of their actions. The researchers found that children who were **encouraged for their effort** *showed more interest in learning, demonstrated greater persistence and more enjoyment, attributed their failure to lack of effort (which they believed they could change), and performed well in subsequent achievement activities*. Noticing effort also encouraged them to work harder and to seek new challenges. Based on these findings, avoid praising your children about areas over which they have no control including things such as intelligence, physical attractiveness, or athletic or artistic gifts. Direct your **encouragement** to areas over which your children do have control; effort, attitude, responsibility, commitment, discipline, focus, decision making, compassion, generosity, respect, love, the list goes on. Look at what exactly your children did well and specifically address those areas. For example, "You worked so hard preparing for this test," or "You were so focused during the entire chess match," and "You shared gently with your sister."

Particularly with young children, the best thing you can do is simply **highlight** what they did. "You fed yourself"

Asking your children **open questions** is another way you can find out what your children thought and felt about their achievement. For example, "What did you enjoy most about your performance?" and "How do you feel about what you just did?" Allow your children to decide for themselves how they feel about their accomplishments,

Next time you're out, take note of what parents say to their children. I'll bet you hear "Good job!" (or some variation) constantly. Next, monitor what you say to your children in the same situations. Then, erase "Good job!"

In our social media culture, it appears we hear only superlatives (best, worst etc.) which may be training us to speak that same way to our children. When we can understand the true difference between praise and encouragement, we are on the path to more effective communication with our family.

Praise

Is *my opinion*

Inflates accomplishments

Rewards outcome

Promotes "winning"

Values pleasing others

Uses "generic" words

Makes statements

Encouragement

Is *about the child*

Builds confidence

Acknowledges effort

Promotes cooperation

Values helping others

Uses descriptive words

Asks discerning questions

A word of caution....

If we say something encouraging, but then add something discouraging, the encouragement is forgotten:

"It looks like you worked hard on that....**but**, you could do that more often."