



Giving Effective Verbal Praise

When parents encourage their children, confidence and competence grow. One strategy for encouraging children is verbal praise. However, research conducted by Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, suggests that person-focused praise (e.g., "you're so smart" or "you're such a good boy") can have unintended, negative impacts on confidence, motivation, determination, and effort.

Children who are regularly praised for personal characteristics, such as intelligence, may be unwilling to try harder tasks or take risks because they fear making mistakes or not being praiseworthy. Person-focused praise can also lead children to develop unrealistic expectations, compare themselves to others, or become obsessed with achievements.

How You Praise Your Children Matters!

The type of praise that genuinely encourages children and promotes positive development follows:

Praise Should Be Specific

Praise should *clearly communicate* to the child what they have done well. Generic praise (e.g., "good job") does not benefit children because it does not help them understand what specific behaviors are desirable and should be continued in the future.



For Example: If your child cleans up their toys, rather than simply saying, "thank you," an effective praise statement would be to say something like, "Thank you so much for picking up all of your toys and putting them away in the toy box."

Praise Should Be Effort-Focused

Praise that *emphasizes effort, determination, and learning* helps children understand that these tools are necessary to overcome setbacks. Praise that encourages effort and a positive attitude leads children to be driven to achieve by personal fulfillment rather than by comparison to others or competition.



For Example: If your child has learned to write their first name, rather than telling the how smart they are, an effective praise statement would be to say something like, "You have worked so hard on spelling your name, and it really shows here. You stuck with practicing it even when it was hard. That's great!"

Praise Should Be Genuine

Praise should be communicated in a sincere way. Here are some tips on how to ensure that your praise statements are delivered in a sincere manner.



When Delivering Praise:

- Get close to your child;
- Make eye contact;
- Use an enthusiastic tone of voice; and
- Keep statements realistic.

You Should Avoid:



Exaggerated Praise

Exaggerated praise (e.g., "That's the most amazing picture I've ever seen") is not beneficial. According to Kenneth Ginsburg, Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, this type of praise comes across as dishonest and unbelievable, and it can cause children to become indifferent to more genuine praise.



Sarcastic Compliments

Criticism that is sarcastically disguised as a compliment confuses children. Children do not know if they should pay attention to what was said or how it was said, which makes it hard for them to know if the behavior should continue or discontinue.



Praise for Ordinary Tasks

According to research by Wulf-Uwe Meyer, Professor of Psychology at the University of Bielefeld in Germany, praise that is given for simple and ordinary tasks (e.g., praising an 8 year old for tying their shoes) is counterproductive because it can lead children to believe they are low of ability (e.g., "I must be really incompetent if I'm getting praised for doing something this easy").

Praise Should Be Timely

When children are learning a new behavior or skill, praise should be delivered as soon as parents notice or become aware of the behavior or activity. According to Gerald R. Patterson, a distinguished Research Scientist at the Oregon Social Learning Center, praise becomes much less effective at reinforcing positive behavior the longer it is delayed. Parents need to pause what they are doing and offer praise as soon as they notice their child engaging in valued and appreciated behaviors or activities.

Praise Should Be Fitting

As children begin to perform a desired behavior or skill more regularly, praise should be used less and less frequently as a reinforcer. According to Patterson, learned behaviors are more likely to continue if they are occasionally reinforced.



For Example: If your child begins to regularly use their manners at the dinner table, instead of praising them every time they are polite, a parent should praise their behavior once in a while.



Effective Verbal Praise Examples

Here are some useful examples of praise statements to try with your child:

Don't be Generic	Try to be <i>Specific</i>
"Good job!"	"You put all of the colored pencils back into the box and put the box back in the drawer. The table looks very clean now. Thank you."
"Nice work!"	"You sounded out all of the words in that sentence even when it was hard. Way to go!"
"Amazing!"	"You were very polite and used your manners when speaking to your teacher at the conference today. Thank you."

Don't be Person-Focused	Try to be <i>Effort-Focused</i>
"You're so smart!"	"You studied hard for your spelling test. You wrote the words out every day this week, and it really paid off!"
"You're such a nice girl!"	"You really put a lot of thought into how you could help your friend with her show-and-tell project. I bet she really appreciated what you did for her."
"You're a fantastic artist!"	"You're putting a lot of detail into how you're drawing the house and family. It looks very colorful!"

Don't Exaggerate	Try to be <i>Genuine</i>
"That was the most amazing touchdown I've ever seen!"	"You ran as hard as you could to get that touchdown. I like how you didn't give up even when it looked like you were about to get tackled."
"There isn't a better reader than you on the face of the planet!"	"That was a really long book, but you stuck with it until you finished it. You didn't give up even when you didn't know a word. You're making improvements, and it shows."
"Wow, I've never eaten a sandwich that tasted so good. You're going to be America's next great chef!"	"I really appreciate that you put all my favorite toppings on the sandwich you made me. That was very thoughtful!"

Additional resources, skills, and strategies for parents are available at no cost through the online Thrive Initiative programming. Visit the Thrive website <https://thrive.psu.edu>, and sign up today!