

Praise Is Important to Raising a Confident Child

Self-esteem is the way your daughter feels about what she believes are her positive qualities, values, abilities, and worth as a human being. Helping your daughter to develop self-esteem is a gift that can protect her from hurtful or wrong images or labels that other people express about her. It also insulates her from giving in to bullies, poor influences, and peer pressure to engage in risky behavior.

Nothing Wrong With Feeling Good

Some new research seems to challenge the notion that praise is a good thing and suggests that too much praise is being passed around causing some children to become bold, rude, and self-centered. Meanwhile, this research also *agrees* with earlier findings: that the context and content of praise are as important as the praise itself.

Self-esteem: An attitude of acceptance, approval, and respect toward oneself, manifested by personal recognition of one's abilities and achievements and an acknowledgement of one's limitations.

Self-centered: Concerned with oneself and one's own interests. This is when a person believes himself to be better than others and he tries to make others feel bad about themselves in order to maintain his status.

Self-image: One's idea of oneself or one's status. This is how we believe others think about us, such as "pretty," "smart," or "athletic."

Some parents may be offering praise for the sake of praising that has no context, effort, or accomplishment to it. Others are limiting their praise in an effort to raise "responsible" children. Most disappointing, is that praise seems to be offered less frequently as a tool for motivating children as they enter and proceed through middle school and into high school, which seems to be resulting in correspondingly lower grades.⁴

Let's Count the Ways to Praise

The many researchers, psychologists, authors, and educators who have addressed praise agree: affirming your daughter's attempts as well as successes helps her along the path to achieving her goals. Yet, it is the content and the context as much as the act of praising that helps her develop concepts of fairness, effort, competence, and achievement as she relates to others. For example, "I'm pleased that you got an early start on your science project." This simple statement includes the context, a description of the situation that was observed as warranting praise ("getting an early start on your science project") and the content of expressing appreciation ("I'm pleased").

Descriptive Praise

Descriptive praise makes your child feel good inside. It is free of evaluation, focuses on your daughter's accomplishment and your observations, and reinforces behavior that you would like for her to repeat in the future. Descriptive praise:

- Focuses on the specifics of your son's accomplishments.
- Is free of evaluation.
- *Affirms* what has been done rather than *evaluates* what has been done.
- Leaves room for your son to draw the conclusion and make the evaluation, "I feel proud for cleaning up my room," or "I am creative."
- The evaluation of the level of effort is internal. It is being appreciated by the person the child needs to trust most—himself.



Here are some tips on how to deliver descriptive praise.

Describe in detail what she did that warranted your praise and why it was a "good job" in your eyes. For example, "You got all the toys back into the box without a single reminder." or "Your picture has lots of bright colors that attracted my attention."

Be honest and mean what you say. "I'm pleased with the way your effort has improved your math grade," rather than "This grade is terrific."

Offer praise along the way. For example, "I see that your extra effort has helped you spell two more words correctly than you did in last week's test."

Build your vocabulary. Try different words that help describe your son's accomplishment such as "That science project looks well constructed," or "This paper makes me look at that subject in a new way."

Be specific. Talk about the child's specific accomplishment in terms of his performance, skills or talent. Say, "I like the way you organized and wrote your book report," not just "I'm proud of you."

Appreciative Praise

Appreciative praise helps your child understand how behavior affects others. Appreciative praise is also free of evaluation and gives you an opportunity to mention specific behavior and its positive effects. For example, "Thank you for helping with the grocery shopping. It made that errand easier." Appreciative praise:



- Expresses thanks for a specific behavior.
- Describes the positive effect it had on your life or that of the family.
- Tells what behaviors are helpful.
- Shares appreciation.

Here are some tips on how to deliver appreciative praise.

Be sincere. Children and youth can tell when praise is genuine. "Thanks for being ready to leave on time for the movie. We're all looking forward to it."

Comment on what you saw. Be specific and describe the action you observed. For example, "You really worked at helping your brother learn to tie his shoes. I won't have to worry that he'll trip over his laces."

Using *descriptive* and *appreciative* praise can help your son develop self-confidence and self-motivation. It also makes him less likely to be dependent on the approval of someone who can be a bad influence. When he feels in control of his life, your son will make decisions based on what he approves of for himself.

Evaluative Praise

"You're terrific!" "That was awesome."

Evaluative praise limits your child. While being "terrific" feels really good at first, it is nearly impossible to maintain. He may feel pressure to constantly live up to expectations of being terrific. In addition, this may not have been a terrific effort on his part, and he could end up feeling guilty. Just as important, lavish praise like this may remind him of all the times when he said or did something that he thought was a best effort which was not rewarded with appreciation. It could even bring to mind a mistake he made and he was reminded that he wasn't terrific at all. The compliment then becomes false praise. Evaluative praise:

- Uses words like "good," "excellent," "super," "tremendous," "fantastic," and "superb."
- Sounds like you have put a value on your daughter's behavior, accomplishments, ideas, appearance, character, effort, or energy.

Balance Is Best

Treat praising your son the way you would like to hear it for yourself and you will probably hit the right balance. At work, if you lived on a steady diet of, "You're terrific!" "What a genius!" and "Great job!" you have no way of knowing how you can improve or what you should keep doing that pleased your boss. Whereas, "Nice layout. The colors really pop," makes you feel good about a job well done and describe an accomplishment you can build on. Likewise, your sincere praise about your son's accomplishment can contribute to his becoming the confident, competent, and responsible grown-up that you want him to be.

The material found in this document has been adapted from the article "Praise Is Important to Raising a Confident Child", available at <http://family.samhsa.gov>.