

Using Praise Isn't Always Fantastic

While praise can be a positive experience for a child it is important to be mindful of its limitations and to use it sparingly. Praise words such as good, great, super, excellent and terrific teach children to look for external gratification. Praise can direct children to become dependent on an authority figure to feel good about themselves. When a child is praised too frequently or more enthusiastically than a situation warrants it can become meaningless. Getting an abundance of praise can be experienced as not being truly seen and heard. Even young children know that everything they do isn't equally wonderful and some are not wonderful at all. They may become distrustful of praise even when it is appropriate. Children who receive large doses of praise may be anxious about a failing. Other children become praise junkies. When out of their praise abundant environment they may become stressed or anxious when mom doesn't praise them as much as their teacher does or their teacher doesn't praise them as much as mom and dad. Some children who are lavishly praised will put out minimal efforts because a minimum seems to be all that is expected. Less is more. There are other ways of being positive with a child.

Letting a child know you are sincerely interested in them is a way of letting them know how valuable they are. Notice new clothes, help them pursue an interest in dinosaurs, spend time with them. Ask them how they created an art project or wonder aloud about what they must have been thinking about when they chose the bright colors in their painting. Help them to learn to develop an inner sense of value. "It looks like you had fun building that tower," instead of "Super!" respects a child's responsibility for his or her own happiness rather than encouraging dependence on someone or something else to feel content. If a child doesn't like something they did, instead of discounting the child's assessment by assuring them that it is in fact wonderful, help them to figure out what they are disappointed in. "You don't seem too happy with your picture" "You were hoping the colors would be brighter," "You wished you had markers to color with instead of crayons for this picture." These responses indicate that you are paying close attention and honor the child's feelings.

When you use praise be specific. Think of showing interest and showing appreciation for the process rather than the product. "The face you drew on the sun makes me feel sunshiny" rather than, "What a beautiful picture". "Thanks for helping me find the foods we had coupons for" instead of, "You were so good in the grocery store". "You were so good today." It is a positive statement without substance. It doesn't give the child any useful information.

Value a Child by:

- Help a child to become aware of their feelings. Observe out loud how he or she seems to be feeling. "You don't look very happy about your picture." is nonjudgmental and honors the child's feelings without putting them on the spot by asking why. Asking a child why can make them feel they need to justify their feelings or give an expected answer.

- Ask a child what they like or don't like. Encourage them to be specific.
- Allow a child to feel bad about a project they did or even about themselves. Offer comfort and support. Helping the child to find his or her own solution honors their strength and wisdom
- Instead of assuring a child that something they are unhappy with is wonderful help them to figure out what it would take for them to feel better about their project. "It sounds like you wish you had more time to work on your picture", "I bet if you practiced with the scissors you might be able to figure out how to do what you had in mind".
- Remember and follow up on a child's interests and things they have told you about their lives.
- Acknowledge children's frustrations and encourage them to keep trying.
- Teach a child that mistakes are part of learning for everyone.
- Try not to compare. The message should be that everyone has different strengths. Equal abilities and achievements across the board is not a realistic goal for any of us.
- Showing interest and being specific encourages dialogue with a child and fosters a relationship. Nonspecific praise puts the adult in charge of placing a value on what a child has done.
- Kids are pretty good at reading adults. Be truthful. It's far better to tell a child that a picture isn't your favorite (of theirs) than to fake, "Fantastic!" confusing a child. We all have different likes and dislikes. "I think your dinosaur pictures are my favorites. What about you? Which are your favorite pictures?"