

Parenting for Success Class #4

Effective Praise



Introduction

Praise is Powerful!

Praising your child is one of the most important things a parent can do. Praise is nourishment; it helps your child grow emotionally just as food helps your child grow physically.

Many of us have been trained to focus on the negative—to see our children’s mistakes and shortcomings. When describing their own childhood experiences, it’s not uncommon to hear adults say that “when growing up, the only time I heard from my parents was when I had done something wrong.” Does this sound familiar?

But when parents actively focus on as many positive things as possible, children feel better about themselves, and positive behaviors increase drastically. Praise really works! Just make sure you are consistent. Remember that your children won’t always remember what you said, but they will definitely remember how you made them feel.



Knowing When to Praise

Praise takes so little time, and yet the benefits are great. It is almost always appropriate to offer general praise to your kids, but specific praise can help reinforce positive behaviors in the following situations.

- **Offer praise for the things we take for granted**
- **Offer praise for improvement, no matter how small**
- **Offer praise for trying to learn something new**



When Giving Praise

- **Show your approval**—Kids are like the rest of us. They not only like to hear nice things said about them, they'll work harder to get more praise in the future. When you combine a sign of your approval with specific praise, the praise is that much more meaningful.
- **Describe the positive**—Make sure your child understands what they did so they can repeat the behavior in the future. Make it brief and to the point.
- **Give a reason**—Giving your child a reason for the praise shows the relationship between their behavior and the consequence. Make this relevant to them. Ask yourself, how will this behavior benefit them?
- **Offer a reward (optional)**—When you are especially pleased with a certain behavior, or your child made a big improvement in a certain area, you can reward your child with a special privilege.



Showing Approval

Effective praise begins with a show of approval. Try to convey excitement that your child did something noteworthy. This will get your child's attention and ensure that he or she is receptive to your message.

Examples:

- “Good job, Johnny!”
- “Way to go, Melissa!”
- “Justin, you’re the greatest!”



Describing the Positive

This step is critical to giving effective praise. This is where you reinforce the connection between the positive consequence and the behavior that led to it. Now your child will know what he or she did well, and they will choose to repeat the behavior in the future.

- Be specific—remember to describe a behavior you actually saw or heard.
- Make your comments brief and to the point so it's easier for your child to understand.
- If the behavior is an improvement, remember to show empathy (Example: “I know you don't like to clean your room, but...”).

Examples:

- “You got home right on time.”
- “Right now, you are making your bed and picking up your dirty clothes.”
- “You got an 80% on your math test.”



Giving a Reason

Once again, this step helps children understand the connection between behavior and outcomes. Not only is praise a positive consequence for good behavior, you can further reinforce the positive consequence by highlighting other positive outcomes that can come from their behavior.

- Should be brief, believable, and age-appropriate.
- Should be child-related—remember to make the reason something that is important to them (Example: “Now you’ll have more time to play with your friends.”).



Giving a Reason

Here are some examples of youth-oriented reasons:

- “It’s important to accept feedback from your teacher so that he knows you are taking responsibility for your mistakes. Now he will be more likely to help you in the future.”
- “When you get home on time, I will trust you more often and will most likely let you go out more often.”
- “When you improve your grades, you will have a shorter homework time at night.”
- “Sharing your toys with others is helpful because they will be more likely to share their toys with you.”



Offering a Reward

Offering a reward can further reinforce the positive behavior by increasing the value of the positive consequence. This can be a fun, unexpected way to show your approval and appreciation. Rewards can be large or small, but make sure they fit the behavior. Rewards can be particularly effective when they are directly related to the behavior. Consider using the words “you have earned” when giving a reward; this shows that the reward is a positive consequence (it also helps you avoid offering a bribe by mistake).

Examples:

- “Since you cleaned your room so well, you don’t have to help set the table for dinner this evening.”
- “Since you improved your score so much from your last test, you have earned an ice cream cone.”



Putting the Steps Together

Example #1:

- “Good job, Johnny!”
- “You got home right on time.”
- “When you get home on time, I will trust you more often and will most likely let you go out more often.”



Putting the Steps Together

Example #2:

- “Way to go, Melissa! I know you don’t like cleaning your room, but...”
- “Right now, you are making your bed and picking up your dirty clothes.”
- “Now you’ll have more time to play with your friends.”
- “And since you cleaned your room so well, you don’t have to help set the table for dinner this evening.”



Putting the Steps Together

Example #3:

- “Justin, you’re the greatest!”
- “You got an 80% on your math test.”
- “When you improve your grades, you will have a shorter homework time at night.”
- “Since you improved your score so much from your last test, you have earned an ice cream cone.”



Conclusion

Always remember the 4:1 ratio—praise your child four times as much as you correct him or her. However, don't praise for everything! It will lose its effectiveness.

Also remember that praise needs to be contingent—only offer praise for something your child has already done. And praise your child more often when they are learning a new skill. This will not only reinforce the behavior, it will encourage them along the way.

Effective praise has lasting positive impacts on families because it helps children develop higher self-esteem. They will like themselves more, and they will appreciate the way you make them feel.



Next Class

In class #5, we will look at family meetings and how families can set rules they can all agree upon.

Thank you!

We hope this class was useful to you.

For more free parenting resources, including additional classes in this series, please visit:

www.youthvillage.org

