

Do Children Really Need Praise?

by Aletha Solter, Ph.D.

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We naturally want to encourage children to learn and to feel good about themselves. With that goal in mind, it is a common assumption that children benefit from being praised. But is this assumption correct?

Many people praise children with words such as "*good job*," "*good girl*," "*you're really smart*," "*that's a pretty drawing*," and "*you're a great swimmer!*" Unfortunately, however, this kind of praise may not be the best way to help children learn or to boost their self-esteem.

There are different kinds of praise, and psychologists have studied the effects of these on children's motivation, performance, and self-esteem. These researchers have found that positive value judgments of a child's abilities or accomplishments (such as the examples given above) are often less effective than other kinds of praise or encouragement. In fact, this kind of praise can have some unwanted consequences.

The hidden pitfalls of praise

Studies have shown that praise with value judgments does not necessarily motivate children to learn. In fact, it can have the opposite effect by undermining children's intrinsic motivation. Children are born with the desire and the ability to learn, and they naturally take pride in their progress. They don't care whether their accomplishments are "good" or not until we start praising or rewarding them. When we praise or reward children for their accomplishments, they may come to depend on external approval and lose touch with their inherent desire to learn and their natural pride in their abilities.

Another problem is that praise with value judgments can have the opposite effect of what we want and can lead to anxiety, insecurity, and low self-esteem. This fact may seem surprising at first, but it's actually quite logical. If we tell a child, "You're really smart," when she correctly solves a math problem, she may feel stupid the next time she makes a mistake. In fact, she may become anxious or insecure while doing math for fear of not meeting our expectations about her intelligence.

So what can we do? What is our role? How can we help children learn and feel good about themselves without using this kind of praise? It may seem strange or even uncaring to refrain from praising children in these ways. Luckily, there are many helpful ways to encourage children and strengthen their self-esteem without the use of value judgments.

How to encourage children without using value judgments



Mirror children's excitement and pride about their accomplishments. Celebrate with them, but avoid value judgments.

- "You did it!"
- "Yay!" "Wow!"
- "I bet you're really proud of yourself!"
- "It looks like you had a lot of fun doing that!"
- "You worked really hard on that."

♥ Offer feedback by comparing their performance *to their own past performance* (but not to other people or to some arbitrary standard of perfection).

- "That's the farthest you've ever swum."
- "That's the tallest tower you've ever built."
- "You didn't need my help that time."
- "Wow! You didn't make any mistakes that time."
- "That's the first time you finished all your homework before dinner."

♥ Share your feelings (be honest and authentic).

- "Your painting reminds me of a summer day."
- "I would love to live in that Lego house because it has lots of windows."
- "Now that you have put your toys away, I can walk without stumbling."
- "I had so much fun cooking dinner with you."
- "I love watching you dance."

Note: Avoid sharing positive feelings in an attempt to control other children's behavior. For example, when a teacher says "I like the way Johnny is sitting still," a possible outcome is that the other children will resent Johnny and feel that the teacher likes him better.

♥ Show interest by asking questions.

- "Would you like to tell me about your painting?"
- "How did you solve that math problem?"
- "Did it turn out the way you wanted? Did you reach your goal?"
- "What's your favorite swimming stroke?"
- "Did you have fun doing that? What was the hardest part?"

Note: Avoid asking questions implying that the child could have done something better, such as "Why didn't you use your fastest swimming stroke?"

♥ Provide nonverbal appreciation and encouragement.

- Display their art work.
- Watch and listen when they sing, play an instrument, dance, build, or create.
- Applaud after a performance, if appropriate to express your enjoyment (but don't overdo it).
- Take pictures and make audio or video recordings of them (if they agree).
- Let them see you struggling to learn something new and making mistakes.

About the author

Aletha Solter, PhD, is a developmental psychologist, international speaker, consultant, and founder of the Aware Parenting Institute (www.awareparenting.com). Her books have been translated into many languages, and she is recognized internationally as an expert on attachment, trauma, and non-punitive discipline. She lives in California, and is the mother of two grown children. The titles of her books are: ***The Aware Baby***, ***Cooperative and Connected***, ***Tears and Tantrums***, ***Raising Drug-Free Kids***, ***Attachment Play***, and ***Healing Your Traumatized Child***.

Aware Parenting is a philosophy of child-rearing that has the potential to change the world. Based on cutting-edge research and insights in child development, Aware Parenting questions most traditional assumptions about raising children and proposes a new approach that can profoundly shift a parent's relationship with his or her child. Parents who follow this approach raise children who are bright, compassionate, competent, nonviolent, and drug free.

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