

The Power of Praise

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At a Glance:

- Praise can have a powerful effect on children with learning and attention issues.
- Some types of praise can build your child's confidence. Some types of praise can undermine it.
- It's better to praise your child for his efforts rather than for his natural ability.

Praise can have a powerful effect on your child. Acknowledging his efforts and achievements can boost his self-confidence and help motivate him to keep trying hard and looking for effective strategies to overcome his challenges.

But some kinds of praise are more helpful than others. In fact, research has shown that some kinds of praise can backfire and make kids doubt their abilities. For example, it may seem like a good idea to tell your child "You're incredibly smart!" or "Great job!" But there are more effective ways to build his self-esteem.

Two Kinds of Praise

There are two main types of praise: personal praise and effort-based praise. Personal praise highlights your child's natural ability, such as his intelligence or his talent for playing the piano. It's the kind of praise parents often use to express affection. For example, you might say to your child, "You're such a good writer" or "You have such a beautiful singing voice." But be careful with this kind of praise. It could actually undermine your child's confidence.

Personal praise tends to focus on the talents your child was born with. If he believes he arrived prepackaged with certain abilities, he might think he doesn't have the ability to improve in those areas. Personal praise can make kids less willing to risk trying new things for fear of revealing just how little talent they have.

Sweeping statements about your child's abilities are not as helpful as specific statements about the things he does. It's better to focus on his efforts. Effort-based praise emphasizes what he can control, such as how much time he spends on a project or which strategies he uses. That's why effort-based praise such as "I am so impressed at how hard you worked on your science project" is more empowering than "Wow, you're good at science!"

Reasons to Love Effort-Based Praise

Kids with learning and attention issues need to be reminded that the process of working toward a goal is just as important as reaching the goal. Your child may need to try several different strategies before he successfully completes a task. That's yet another reason why it's a good idea to use effort-based praise.

Look for opportunities to compliment the way your child is approaching a task rather than placing all your emphasis on the end result, which may not turn out how he had hoped. Effort-based praise lets you tell your child you value not only him, but also his willingness to take risks and his determination to work toward his goals.

For example, let's say your child's goal is to get to school on time. There are smaller steps along the way: waking up, brushing his teeth, getting dressed and having his backpack ready. By recognizing the

steps your child does well, you can help him see that he is capable of reaching the overall goal. You can also show him he can achieve it through effort and planning.

Key Components of Effort-Based Praise

Effort-based praise can be a great way to motivate your child. To maximize its effectiveness, be sure to include these components:

- Sincerity: “Thank you for all of the time you put into making this cake” is better than “This is the most delicious cake I’ve ever tasted!” Insincere praise can make your child wonder if you think he’s not capable of doing any better. Overpraising can also make him wonder if you don’t know what really good cake tastes like.
- Specificity: “I like how you double-checked all your math problems” is better than “Good job on your homework.” Good, descriptive praise takes the guesswork out of what you’re praising. This can help reinforce the positive behavior you want your child to repeat.
- Realistic standards: “Your watercolor technique is really coming along nicely—did you use any new techniques in this painting?” is better than “This is such a fantastic painting. Some day you’ll have your own art gallery!” Try to praise your child’s efforts in a way that emphasizes growth and learning from mistakes. This can help avoid putting too much pressure on him to succeed the next time.

What to Watch Out For

Effort-based praise is the most helpful when it tells your child what he’s doing well compared to himself, not to other people. Praise that focuses on outperforming peers can end up reducing your child’s motivation, especially if he stops coming out on top. That’s why saying “I like the way you had your backpack ready to go at the door this morning” is more empowering than “Good for you! You were ready before your sister.”

The other big thing to watch out for is inflated praise. You might think that if your child does something well, telling him he’s doing it really well will give his self-esteem an extra boost. But researchers have found that inflated praise can actually make kids less likely to take on new challenges because they think they’ll have to meet really high standards.

That’s why it’s a good idea to stick with genuine praise about your child’s efforts. Explore more tips on how to praise his hard work, the problem-solving strategies he uses and his ability to keep moving forward, even when there are setbacks. Look at this handy chart for examples of how to boost your child’s self-esteem through praise. And remember that there are other ways besides praise to help build his self-esteem.

Key Takeaways:

- Inflated praise can backfire and make your child less willing to try new challenges.
- Sincere and specific praise helps your child know exactly what he’s doing well.
- Use effort-based praise to celebrate and recognize the process as well as the end result.