



“Good job!” Is Praising Young Children a Good idea?

By Lauren Lowry, Hanen SLP and clinical writer

“Good job!”, “Gimme five!”, “Awesome!”, “What a beautiful picture!”... these are a sampling of encouraging phrases you might hear at any playground, preschool, or anywhere else young children hang out. I’d never really given these words or the idea of praise much thought. I praise my own children when they accomplish something challenging or new, and I also praise the children with whom I work. After all, children with communication difficulties can really struggle sometimes – shouldn’t we acknowledge their efforts?

You can imagine my surprise then, when I attended a parenting talk at my son’s school, which addressed the negative effects of praise on children. Apparently, praise manipulates children so that they do what the *adult* wants them to do; it can also decrease a child’s motivation and sense of achievement. Yikes!

Turning to the research on this topic, I realized that there is a great debate among experts about the effects of praise on children. I came across a helpful article called “Clarifying Issues Regarding the Use of Praise with Young Children” by Dr. Mojdeh Bayat [1] which summarizes this debate, with particular focus on the use of praise with children with special needs. Using information from Dr. Bayat’s article and other sources, I have summarized the “praise debate” below, and given some suggestions about using praise with young children.

Praising Children – How it all Started

The terms “good boy” and “good girl” have been used since at least the mid-1800’s [1]. But the idea of using praise to motivate children really took off after the publication of “*The Psychology of Self-Esteem*” [2] in 1969, which suggested that many of the problems of American society resulted from lack of self-esteem [1]. As a result, praise became a way to boost children’s self-esteem, and over a thousand scholarly articles have since promoted the use of praise to improve children’s motivation and school performance.

Praising children with special needs increased in the 1960s, when studies (especially from the field of behaviourism) began to show its positive effects. Many intervention programs today continue to use praise with children with special needs because it can prevent:

- “learned helplessness” – which can develop when a child has repeated negative experiences in a situation, and comes to believe that he has no control over the outcome [1]. In this case, praise may motivate and encourage a child to learn.
- challenging behaviours – when an appropriate behaviour is “positively reinforced” (e.g. praised), it is likely to occur again, while an ignored behavior is likely to decrease [1].

The Flip Side of Praise

In the 1980s and 1990s, some scholars started to argue that praise can undermine children’s motivation, create pressure to continue performing well, discourage risk taking, and reduce independence [3]. Alfie Kohn, an author and lecturer on this topic, explains why praise may be harmful for young children [4], claiming that praise:

- manipulates children – praise is a way of getting children to comply with adults’ wishes. This works in the short term because young children want adults’ approval. But Kohn argues that we should not take advantage of children’s dependence.
- creates praise “junkies” – the more praise children receive, the more they rely on adult evaluations instead of forming their own judgments.
- steals a child’s pleasure – children deserve to delight in their accomplishments instead of being judged. Most people don’t think a statement like “Good job!” is a judgment, but Kohn argues that it’s as much an evaluation as “Bad job”.
- decreases interest – research has shown that people tend to lose interest in activities for which they have been praised. Instead of motivating a child to engage in an activity, praise motivates a child to get more praise.
- reduces achievement – children who are praised for creative tasks tend to stumble at the next task. This may be because of the pressure created to continue to keep up the good work, and because the child has lost interest. In addition, children who are praised are less likely to take risks, as they may fear they won’t receive positive feedback. It’s also been found that students who receive positive reinforcement do not persist in the face of difficulties [5] (Maclellan, 2005).

In some cultures, such as East Asian cultures, praise is rare. Despite this, the children seem to be very motivated [3]. Furthermore, comparable terms for “good boy” and “good girl” don’t exist in some European languages, such as German, French, or Polish [1].

Not all Praise is Created Equal

It may be that not *all* forms of praise are harmful. Research has that shown different types of praise have different effects on children. Distinctions have been made between *person praise* and *process praise*.

- **Person praise** – this type of praise evaluates a child’s traits, like his intelligence [1]. Person praise evaluates a child globally, telling her that she is good or smart or outstanding.

Examples of this kind of praise include, “You’re a good girl”, “You’re so good at this”, or “I’m very proud of you” [5]. Studies have shown that person praise reduces motivation, focuses students on their performance and encourages them to compare their performance with that of others [5].

- **Process praise** – this type of praise is related to the child’s effort [3], and focuses on his or her behavior and actual “work” or output [1]. Examples of process praise include “you tried really hard” or “I see how carefully you are building that tower.” Process praise has been shown to encourage children to develop a flexible mindset, confront their weaknesses, and take on challenges [1].

How Should we Praise Young Children?

The question may not be “Should we praise young children?”, but rather “*How* should we praise young children?” A lot of research has shown that *process praise* motivates children to work hard, learn, explore, and have a healthy outlook on their abilities [1]. In addition, praise that is sincere and conveys realistic expectations can promote a child’s self-motivation [3].

Here are some ways to translate these ideas about effective praise into your everyday life with your child:

- **Describe your child’s behaviour and effort**, not his or her attributes. Statements like “good girl” or “great job” undermine self-motivation, and don’t provide your child with specific information that will help him or her continue the desired behaviour [1]. Instead, say what you see [4], by providing a simple, evaluation-free statement like “You used a lot of bright colours in your picture” or “Your tower is so tall!”. Even a simple “You did it!” tells the child that you noticed, without providing a judgment [4].
- Bayat [1] suggests that **paying positive attention to appropriate behaviour** that is valued can be effective. An encouraging description such as “I can see you are working very hard on that puzzle” or “Wow! You are sharing the toy truck with your brother” tells a child that effort, cooperation, and positive relationships are valued in your home.
- **Avoid praise for low-challenge activities or error-free success** – as this tells a child that he is only praiseworthy when he completes tasks quickly, easily and perfectly, and does not help a child embrace challenge [5].
- **Be careful when praising after failure or mistakes** – Praise such as “Well done. You did your best” can convey pity. It can also contribute to a child’s belief that his or her mistakes are a result of an underlying fixed ability or intelligence (which can’t be improved or changed) rather than due to effort (which can be improved). And telling a child to “Try harder” does not give the child any information about how to improve his or her effort [5]. It may be best to provide process praise and identify what the child *did* accomplish in this case. For example, “You missed the goal, but it was very, very close!”
- **Praise must be sincere** – praise should reflect the amount of effort the child puts in. When praise is meaningless and “over the top”, it loses its effectiveness [1]
- **Choose appropriate activities** – many people praise children in order to maintain their interest in an activity and discourage misbehaviour. However, it is important to think about

whether the child has been given something appropriate to learn, and whether the expectations are realistic [6]. If you find you need to use a lot of praise in order to keep your child interested in an activity, try modifying the activity to make it more interesting or choosing an activity he really likes.

- **Reduce the amount of praise** – praising a child can really become a habit. If your child is naturally interested in an activity and self-motivated, you don't need to use praise at all. Participate with your child during the activity and respond with interest and conversation.
- **Provide natural consequences** – when it comes to communication, praise can get in the way of conversation. Communication is its own reward, so, providing praise regarding a child's attempts to communicate by saying "Yay! You said 'cookie!'" or "Nice talking!" undermines the real purpose of communication, which is to share thoughts and feelings and to get things done. Therefore, if your child says "cookie", give him a cookie and talk about the cookie, which is far more reinforcing since it tells him that his communication was effective. If your child points to bubbles, say, "Wow! Look at all the bubbles!" or talk about how they are floating in the air or how they pop. Your child will be motivated just by having his message understood and responded to with enthusiasm.

So what is the goal when it comes to encouraging children? Kohn [4] suggests that we keep "in mind our long-term goals for our children" and "watch for the effects of what we say" (p. 5). Ultimately, we want to encourage our children to be self-motivated and to embrace challenge... and that means not making them dependent on praise.

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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