

Psych Savvy

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Praise and Rewards

by

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Most of us appreciate a "pat on the back" recognition for our accomplishments. Children and teens are not exceptions. Acknowledging the attempts and successes of young people can help promote positive relationships between adults and children. Acknowledgement can also assist children and adolescents in developing positive feelings about themselves.

Adults may believe that all types of praise and positive reinforcement are equal in their impact on a child's self-esteem. However, current research suggests that certain kinds of reinforcement/praise are better than others. In some cases, praise and rewards may actually diminish self-confidence and independence.

Types of Praise

Feedback can be provided to youngsters for many reasons. Praise can be offered for doing things (i.e. good report cards, sports achievements, artistic skills) or just for being a person (i.e. companionship, kinship, appreciation). Although parents and teachers often focus on the accomplishments of children, it is important to give feedback for both doing and being.

If children and teens are praised only for their achievements, they may begin to judge their self-worth by the things they "do" rather than who they "are". Certainly young people learn about responsibility and productivity by receiving praise and acknowledgement for their successes. However, it is important that they also believe that they are capable and worthwhile individuals even if they are not always attaining their desired goals. Receiving acknowledgement for just being who they are helps adolescents and children (adults too!) feel competent even when meeting with disappointment or failure.

It is extremely important that praise be given sincerely and honestly. Young children, in particular, are very skilled at judging the sincerity of comments. Older children and teens may question their own perceptions or develop mistrustful feelings of

others when praise is not genuine. For example, if a parent is claiming that their child's artwork is a masterpiece without noticing that the child appears disappointed with the drawing, the praise will not be effective in promoting feelings of competence. Instead, the parent could focus on the child's feelings about the picture. It is more important to the development of children's self-esteem and confidence to acknowledge their feelings than to provide an adult evaluation.

Some Thoughts About Rewards

Rewards can provide the extra incentive needed to tackle a project or task which requires effort and commitment. Special privileges, stars, stickers, food treats, toys or money may help boost a child's motivation to persist, and may be effective on a short term basis for specific situations. However, when rewards are given too frequently and for too many situations, children may become dependent on the external rewards rather than develop the joy and pride of accomplishment. Recent studies suggest that children learn to be independent and confident problem solvers when they are self-motivated and able to evaluate their own performance.

Tips for Parents & Teachers

- 1) Praise young people just for being
examples: "Having you as a son/daughter is a joy";
"You're fun to be with"; "You're an asset to my class".
- 2) Focus on the child's/teen's feelings about their accomplishments
examples: "You must feel proud, me too!"; "Your studying paid off, you look happy about this grade"; "You seem disappointed with the results".
- 3) Whenever possible, offer special privileges/outings rather than material goods for rewards.
- 4) Acknowledge attempts, as well as, successes.
- 5) Praise students individually, in addition to giving group feedback. Point out individual efforts personally in a private moment or through a note.

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