

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting Moving Beyond “Good Job, Good Work!”: Praise vs. Encouragement



BY KIM DEMARCHI

In this era of “every kid gets a trophy, star, or certificate”, how do praise and rewards impact children’s motivation and self esteem, and what is the end result? Let’s start with the definitions of both praise and encouragement,

because there are very subtle differences.

Praise: 1. to express favorable judgment of; 2. to glorify; 3. an expression of approval.

Encouragement: 1. to inspire with courage; 2. to spur on; stimulate.

Praise is basically when you tell someone what they did is a good job, i.e.: “You’re such a good girl.” “Your painting is so great!” “You are so beautiful.” “You are so smart.” “I love your cute outfit.” “You scored an awesome goal!”

No doubt that is feels SO good! We like to hear praise, don’t we? It may feel good for the moment, but what does it invite children to decide about themselves? Praise may even seem to work for the moment and motivate good behavior temporarily, but what are the long term results of too much praise?

Notice the word courage in the word encouragement. The purpose of encouragement is to give courage, not to get children to do what we want. It is to build them up when they need it the most. We have all had challenging situations in life, and if we have decided to face them, we’ve needed the courage. Feeling the fear and doing it anyway is probably because you have been given the gift of encouragement. Encouragement isn’t needed for the child that comes home with an “A” on their test. It is needed for the child that comes home with a “D” on their test. They need the courage to face their fears, go back to school, and try again. When children deserve it the least, is when they need it the most.

Praise recognizes only a complete, perfect product, i.e.: “You got it correct!” It focuses just on the quality, i.e.: “You hit another home run!” Encouragement, however, recognizes effort,

improvement, small successes, persistence and determination, i.e.: “You really gave it your best.” or “How do you feel about what you accomplished?” or “You are so focused when you are at bat.”

Praise can sound patronizing or manipulative, i.e.: “I like the way Suzie is sitting.” It can stimulate rivalry and competition, i.e.: “You are the best artist in the class at painting sunsets.” The delivery of encouragement is much more respectful and appreciative, i.e.: “Who can show me how we should be sitting?” It also stimulates cooperation and contribution for the good of all, i.e.: “You helped Billy mix the colors for his sunset.”

Most of the time praise is judgmental, i.e.: “I like the way you did that.” It is evaluative and usually makes the person feel judged. Encouragement is self directing, i.e.: “I appreciate your cooperation.” It has little or no evaluation and the person usually feels accepted.

We use praise most often with children, i.e.: “You’re such a good little boy.” Ask yourself, “Would I make this comment to a friend?” This can be helpful as the comments we usually make to friends usually fit the criteria for encouragement. Can you imagine telling your coworker, “You are such a good boy?”

Praise invites children to change for others. After too much praise, children become “praise junkies” or “approval junkies”. These children will change the way they dress to get their friends approval for wearing the “right” thing. Praise is enabling. These children are constantly asking themselves, “What do others think?” They become dependent on what others think of them, not what they think of themselves. Their internal tape goes something like this: “What do you think, as my friend? As my parent? As my teacher? As my coach?” Encouragement invites children to change for themselves. If children feel capable, accepted, and valued for who they are, not who we want them to be, they will change for themselves, not others. Encouragement is empowering. These children are having the internal conversation: “What do I think? What do I think about my project? My choice? My hair? My grade?” We want to teach children to navigate their world by using their internal compass, not only the external evaluations from others.

What if all parents did was give praise? When the child does well on their report card, it works.

But, what about the failing, discouraged child? Praise doesn’t work in this situation. The child learns to only feel worthy when others approve. Children need to know that we love them no matter what! My love for my children isn’t contingent upon getting the “A”. It isn’t “I love you when you behave, when you do what I say, when you are winning, when you make the team, when you make the 3 pointer...” A parent’s love needs to be unconditional.

Breaking old habits is really difficult. If and when you say, “Good job!”, at least be specific. Instead of “Good job” after they set the table, say “You really saved me some time by setting the table tonight.” Instead of “Great art”, say “You choose really vibrant colors!” Instead of “You are so nice”, say “You shared your crayons with your friend.” When I was re-training myself with my own children, one thing that helped me was to NOT start my sentences with the word “I”. It doesn’t really matter what I think. Here are some statements you might find helpful:

How did you do that?

It got done a lot faster because of your help.

Your questions are really getting me to think.

How did you come up with that?

That was very thoughtful of you.

It looks like you put a lot of effort into this.

What did you enjoy most about this project?

You were polite using please and thank you.

You are a good friend to have.

You make it fun to be on your team.

That must make you feel good inside.

You were listening so intently.

Thank you for being patient, understanding, etc...

Some of you are probably thinking to yourself, “Oh, I have to remember NOT to say Good Job!”



NO! It’s not really that you aren’t supposed to say good job. It’s just that we are working on something bigger than that. We are all striving to have our child develop a strong sense of themselves, and saying good job doesn’t add anything of benefit to that process. It’s not that you can’t say it; a little won’t do harm. Praise is like dessert. A little bit of chocolate here is there is a nice treat. It’s sweet and delicious, and can be enjoyed on occasion, but you certainly can’t live on it. In moderation it’s harmless, but of little value. It shouldn’t and doesn’t take the place of a healthy, nutrient rich dinner (encouragement). Encouragement should be the staple, the dinner, that you feed yourself and your family on a daily basis to continue to grow and thrive.

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