

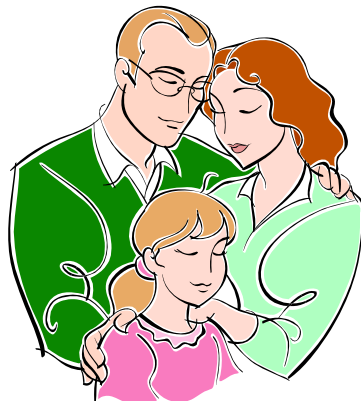
Praise or Encouragement?

In an effort to build a child's self-esteem, some parents go too far with praise. A child who is praised too much may fall into the great-expectations trap, or as Alfie Kohn dubs it, a "praise junkie." It's perfectly fine (and desirable) to burst out in spontaneous delight over something your child does. But, by the time children are preschool age, parents and caregivers should think about when and how they praise.

Don't misunderstand...children need adults who are caring and supportive. But, recognizing the difference between two major types of reinforcement—praise and encouragement—is helpful as you interact with your preschooler.

- **Encouragement** gives children positive feedback focusing on their efforts. It allows children to evaluate their own efforts rather than comparing to others. Encouragement is specific and is given as a child works towards a goal.
- **Praise** is highly judgmental, and focuses on what the adult feels. Praise statements send a subtle message that the adult's opinion is what matters. Children who receive too much praise tend to do things to please adults, not because they are self-motivated.

Encouragement teaches children to evaluate themselves on their own merits. When adults provide children with feedback about what they are doing, children learn to evaluate themselves without comparing their efforts and successes to those of others. Children who hear encouragement regularly learn that what they think about themselves is more important than what others think.



The Down Side of Praise

Praise, according to Alfie Kohn, has negative impacts.

- Praise often works in the short run because children are hungry for approval. But, parents should not exploit that dependence for their own convenience. When you tell your child, "Good job!" are you saying that for your child's emotional benefit or for your own convenience or control?
- Praise expects children to measure themselves based on your approval. It can make children less secure about coming to their own evaluations. Help children become independent thinkers by describing what you see and letting them come to their own judgments.
- Our evaluations (Wonderful! Great effort! Awesome!) tell our children how to feel. We impose our feelings on them. Resist giving your judgment and let your child decide how they feel about their own efforts.
- The more a person is rewarded for doing something, the less likely they come to do it in the future withOUT a reward.

Re-Thinking Praise

The Better Kid Care program from Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension in "Re-thinking Praise" offers these tips for encouraging children.

1 – Be specific.

Instead of saying, "Liza, your picture is beautiful," make specific comments about the child's picture. "I see you used a lot of blue in this area and red over here." Or simply ask a child to tell you more about his picture. Judgment about the picture should be left to the child to decide.

2 – Describe what the child is doing or has done.
 Instead of making a general statement such as “Good job,” comment on what the child is doing. “You picked up the blocks and put them back on the shelf without being asked.”

3 – Set children up for success.
 Comments such as, “You’re such a good boy,” or “You’re a really nice girl,” set up children for failure because it’s impossible for a child to be good or nice all of the time. Comment instead on specific behaviors that you want to reinforce. For example, “Jacob, I saw that you helped Ethan clean up the spilled milk.”

4 – Describe the effect of your child’s efforts on others.
 When children hear encouragement such as “I appreciate your help in setting the table for lunch” or “You were a good friend to help Coralee when she fell,” your comments help them to feel good about their efforts. Their effect on others, not your praise, becomes the motivator.

5 – Avoid comparing children.
 Telling a child “You’re the fastest runner” may be intended to commend her efforts, but what does that statement say to other children? A better way to encourage this child without hurting others would be to say, “You can run fast.”

How Praise and Encouragement Differ

Praise	Encouragement
What a beautiful painting!	You used lots of bright colors in your painting.
What a good girl/boy to clean up your room.	I see you are putting your dirty clothes into the hamper and already made your bed.
You are so strong!	That was a heavy load. Thanks for your help.
What a generous person you are!	When you saw your friend forgot his sandwich, you gave him part of yours. He looks pretty happy to have something to eat.
You were the perfect child.	That was a long speaker. You played quietly with your toys and read your book so as not to disturb others who were listening.
Good job!	You are really working hard to line up those blocks.

Challenge yourself. Encouraging your child may take a bit more effort than simply offering a quick praise statement. The next time you are ready to praise, think how you could change your praise statement to words of encouragement.

Remember: Most children thrive with **more encouragement.**



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Prepared by: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
 Reviewer: Dave Riley, Extension Specialist, Child Development and Early Education, UW-Madison
 Layout: Penny Otte, Office Operations Associate, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin, Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
 March 2011