

Can you praise your child too much?

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Q: Many parents, believing that praise helps build a child's self-esteem, constantly praise their children. Isn't this a good thing? Isn't praise better than criticism?

A: Praise is certainly good for children, but some kinds of praise are better than others. Too much unspecific praise, or overpraise, can become meaningless. Some parents throw out praises all the time, but unless they're specific they get lost. Praise that's too general, like "you're such a good child" that's not connected with a specific behavior, doesn't mean much. Too much praise can backfire; it doesn't allow the child to experience failure and to learn some ways to deal with it. We don't want to rescue children from normal life challenges.

Q: Do kids know the difference between different kinds of praise?

A: They certainly do. By age 7, kids can distinguish between general praise and specific praise. They know when they haven't earned the praise. A child should know exactly what he/she did to earn the praise.

Q: If constant praise isn't good for a child, are there certain ways to praise a child that are more helpful?

A: Praise can be a teaching tool. The point of specific praise is to be descriptive and concrete so kids learn how to change their behavior.

Q: What are some examples of specific and descriptive praise? How does this work in real life?

A: Here are some examples: If you want to help your child straighten out his room, catch him when he's doing something good like picking up toys which have been spread out all over the floor, and praise that act specifically with "I like the way you put your toys back on the shelves" or "You did a great job putting your toys back." If a child completes a hard puzzle, you might say "I like the way you kept trying to get the pieces in the right place." In that way you're praising a specific act, and you're praising the effort, not the outcome. That's an important point to remember.

Here's another example: When you're talking about academic work, remember, don't connect praise to the outcome. Rather than praise the A on a test with something like "You're so smart," praise the effort. "You really studied hard for that test." Praise something over which the child has control—focusing, paying attention, sharing, working hard, etc. Children who are constantly praised for being smart tend to avoid challenges because they think they may fail. A child who is praised for effort or other qualities over which s/he has control will gain self-confidence.

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