

Effective Verbal Praise

I often hear from parents that they have tried behavior modification using verbal praise or some sort of token or other reward, but, have found it to be ineffective. Generally, verbal praise is preferred over a token or other tangible reward because it helps a child internalize their own reward system and discourages them from working only for the external prize. But, to be effective verbal praise needs to have specific attributes.

Your praise needs to be precise: Don't tell a child that she did a "good" job on her math homework. Instead say, "I see that you were able to get 8 out of the 10 math problems correct on your own. That's a good level of independent work." If an art project comes home from school, don't say: "That's beautiful". Instead, say: "I like how you achieved perspective by making the things far away smaller". This way the child knows exactly what the child did that was done well, and they can use your verbal description internally to reward themselves.

Praise should focus on the child, not the child's actions: For instance, it is more important to praise generosity than earning a B. It is more important to praise perseverance with a difficult task than it is to praise completion. In short, you want to approve of positive character traits in your child. You don't want to make your child feel as if they only get your praise for doing specific tasks like a dog trained to beg for food. Praise your child for curiosity, for showing a zest for life when they tackle something, for consistently being on time, or being dependable in doing chores. It is not the act you are praising but, the character trait that you want to foster. For example, my daughter has a very difficult time writing due to low muscle tone. So, she decided that she would type her spelling words three times every night instead of writing them by hand. I praised her problem solving and her ingenuity. Not, her typing or her spelling.

Make certain that praise is appropriate to your child's mental age: Children who are less cognitively developed require more frequent reinforcers. As a child matures, they become annoyed with praise for small things because they know that these are things people their age should be doing. So, as your child matures, become more selective about what you praise and how often you praise. By doing this, little by little, you are turning the responsibility for evaluating them and their work to your child, and in so doing you are equipping your child to function as a self-monitoring adult.

Remember the importance of non-verbal cues: When children are overwhelmed or excited they may not fully process verbal cues, or you might not be close enough to give verbal guidance at a time that guidance is needed. At such times remember the effectiveness of non-verbal cues. A thumb up when your child plays a piece well in a concert, a high five as they pass by you after a soccer game, or a shrug when they fail to break four boards on the first time in a Karate test, all communicate very powerful messages of acceptance to the child. As in the Karate test, you may be praising the participating, the effort, or the willingness to continue on, rather than the achievement per se'.

Teach that success is a process: Some parents wait until their special needs child has reached the final goal to praise. This can be a particularly destructive process when your child's disabilities are impeding progress. For example, had I waited until my child memorized her math facts to praise her, now in fourth grade, she still would not have received my praise. Instead, I praised important steps and behavior traits. I praised her attempts even when it was hard. I praised her perseverance when she was tired or frustrated. I praised her ingenuity in developing her own finger system that permit her to complete her math with 100 percent accuracy despite never having memorized her math facts. In this case, I made a point of complimenting her on her problem solving. I discussed with her that she had successfully adapted and met her teacher's requirements for performance while accommodating her disability.

Make certain your praise acts as a sign post: To be helpful road signs need to be specific. A sign that says: "You are heading south" is of limited help. In contrast, a sign that says: "100 miles south to Miami," is very useful for planning your schedule or modifying your route. Likewise, children need praise that acts as sign posts. If you are pleased with your son's science project. Let him know what particular features impressed you. You might say: "I like the way you made the transition from plateau to hoodoos so concrete by building each stage out of clay". Or, "It took you a long time and a lot of energy to take all that information organize it, but, your presentation is really clear and makes it simple for someone to understand the process".

While you should compliment children for the diligence and care they put into a neat assignment, don't focus on the neatness itself. Instead, focus on the content of a child's work. Look for creativity and praise creative or logical thinking. For

instance if your daughter prepares a neat easy to read social studies project, you might say: "I really like the diligence you demonstrated by making this project so well organized, but, I'm even more impressed with your creativity in making a usable placemat out of your geography map."

Only say what you mean. Children are masters at seeing through false praise. They'll tell you things like "You are only saying that because you're my mom," or, "Everyone in my class did a better job". This is one of the reasons it is important to praise character traits you want to reinforce rather than products. If you can't think of a meaningful compliment at the moment, hold your tongue and give it some more thought. If your child says: "What do you think?" Be honest and say, "I'm not certain. I don't really know what your teacher was expecting. Can you tell me what she asked for?"

Keep your emotions in check: A child wants to know that you are pleased with their efforts, but, they are embarrassed when parents are gushy or make a fuss over something that is not outstanding. Make certain that you match your "applause" to the level of the child's achievement." Now, when evaluating this achievement don't compare your child to everyone else, judge whether your child has worked up to his or her own potential, and has tried to push himself or herself to do a bit better than usual.

Praise your child's friends along with your child: You want your child to know that you recognize meaningful effort regardless of who is putting forth the effort. So, if you go into the class on parent visitation night and see a number of excellent projects, praise each of the children. Or, if your son's boy scout troop, did a superb job of helping clean up roadside litter, praise all the troop members; not just your child. This helps your child feel like a part of the group, and helps your child recognize that group effort is important. It also lets your child know that you really mean the praise because it is not focused just on your own child.

Boys are from Mars: Mom's this message is particularly for you. Remember that most boys are not only embarrassed when you are gushy, they are also embarrassed when you talk too much or just say too much about what they've done. A pat on the back, a smile, a wave, a thumbs up may be more effective praise for your son, than a verbal compliment.

Face failure squarely: If your child fails a test or a grade, or a project. Talk about it. Let your child know that everyone fails because failing simply means they got it wrong. Everyone makes mistakes and gets it wrong. What counts is not how many times you get it wrong, but, whether or not you keep going until you get it right. Here is where having some good videos on role models like Hellen Keller or Thomas Edison may come in handy. When you discuss your child's failure be certain to provide factual information on what was wrong, what they misunderstood and what they need to do in the future. For example, if a child spelled wrote "foul" instead of "fowl" when the teacher was talking about poultry, talk about the fact that your child correctly wrote what she heard, but, neglected to consider the meaning of the word. Review the fact that some words - called homonyms - sound exactly the same, but, mean different things and that your child needs to pay attention to the meaning of spelling words in the future.

Goals, Accomplishments, and Self-Praise: One of the most effective ways to praise a child, is to teach them to praise themselves. This involves helping your child set a goal, and evaluate their accomplishment. For instance, a child might write in a journal, today I read for 10 minutes. My goal for tomorrow is to read for 15 minutes. Then, tomorrow when your child writes in their journal that they did read for 15 minutes, you can prompt your child to add: "I'm proud because I persisted and met my goal". Or, if a child failed to clean up their room when told to, you might encourage your child to write a goal in their journal to: "Clean my room right after finishing my homework tomorrow." Then, if the child does accomplish this, you can prompt your child to write: "I was responsible for cleaning my own room without a reminder today". For children with motor problems, they could either type their journal or dictate it onto a tape.

Remember, the primary goal of verbal praise is not to reward a child for a specific accomplishment, but rather to help a child increase the frequency of occurrence of desirable character traits that will make them contributing members of a family, their community and desirable employees as adults.

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