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Praise and encouragement empower children to learn new behaviors

By Dennis O'Brien, MA, LCSW

Parents often don't realize how much power they have to influence their children by giving them positive attention for their behavior.

Kids tend to do what gets them attention from their parents, even negative attention. Effective parents utilize predictable consequences to deal with negative behaviors and nurture positive behaviors with praise. The more positive attention you give your child, the more your child will undertake new behaviors and persist at ones you value.

This is true for teens as well as younger children. Although they sometimes act as if they don't care, teens want attention from their parents just as much as younger children do.

Praising your child for doing the right thing will make you a powerful influence in your child's life. Praise and encouragement can be especially powerful when children are trying out new behaviors or learning new habits that could become positive character traits.

Being praised helps people feel good about themselves. When your child feels good around you, he will want to be around you more and to do more things to get positive attention from you. Here are some tips about how to praise effectively.

Decide what values, positive character traits or new behaviors are most important for your child to develop at this point in her life, and look for opportunities to reinforce them.

- Describe exactly what your child did that you are praising. Don't just say, "Great job!" Say, "Great job of clearing the table after dinner and doing it without being asked," or "I really like the way you picked up everything in your room."

Try to give praise as soon as you can. Praise will be most reinforcing then because your child will be most aware of what of what she did.

Don't hesitate to praise your child for doing something well day after day. Your child needs to know that you notice the good habit he is developing.

Praise your child for trying hard. Whether it's learning a sport, being responsible at home or including children who may be left out of activities at school, learning new behaviors can be difficult. Nobody does it right all the time. Children need to understand that mistakes are part of the learning process and that the most important thing is to keep making the effort. Persistence ultimately pays off.

Connect success to effort when you praise. This is another way of letting your child know that you value the efforts she made even more than the success. It also reinforces the notion that success eventually comes from consistently making the effort and helps your child learn to be persistent.

- Stay alert. Keep looking for things to praise. If you need to, catch your child in the act of doing it almost right. Think about the new behavior your child is trying to learn. If you were your child, what would you find difficult? What does your child have to work hardest on?

Don't be afraid to ask your child what he's proud of. You can't expect to see everything, but you can try to learn about what your child did that is praiseworthy.

- Try to avoid pointing out mistakes. This often comes across as criticism, and criticism usually backfires.

Although criticism will sometimes get a child to do what you want—especially if you keep it up until your child is worn down, it won't help your child feel good about you or about what she is doing. It also doesn't teach children to learn to spot their own mistakes. It keeps them dependent on their parents to tell them what to do.

Use questions to help your child learn from mistakes. Under some circumstances pointing out mistakes may be acceptable, provided it's done in a larger context of praise and positive reinforcement.

However, most of the time it is better to ask questions, which will help your child, figure out what the mistakes were and how to improve.

Ask questions like these:

What did you do well? Was there anything you would have liked to do differently? What was hard about what you did? What did you learn that could help you in the future?

Bottom Line: Praise and encouragement motivate children to respond positively and sustain their effort to do the right thing. Parents who utilize their power this way can help their children develop positive character traits they value.

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