

Praise and Building Self-Esteem

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A big focus in the 70's, 80's, and 90's was on "building self-esteem" in children. A primary method was lots of rewards, praise, gold stars, and trophies for everyone on the team. Parents and educators were cautious of using criticism for fear of "damaging self-esteem." Current developmental research shows that this might not have been the best plan. For example, research shows:

- If we reward people for doing something, they lose interest in doing it for its own sake.
- When kids are praised for doing well on a creative task, they often don't do as well the next time – partly because they're afraid of taking risks and are trying hard to "do it right."
- When children are praised for *who they are* (smart, fast, cute) that feels good. But if they get evidence to the contrary (fail a test, lose a race, have looks judged), that damages self-worth. When they're praised for *what they do* that's in their control – they know they can do it again.

How to Offer Effective Praise

- Don't praise "Talent". If every time your child succeeds at something, you say "wow, you're really smart", that implies that when they're not successful at something else they're no longer smart.
- Do praise *effort* and point out the rewards of hard work. "Wow, you worked really hard, and it looks like it turned out just like you hoped." Or: "I can see you're frustrated it's not working out like you hoped. I'm so proud of how hard you've been working on it. What else could you try?"
- On the other side, don't criticize by saying they *lack* talent: "You're always so slow. You'll just never get to the ball before other kids." They'll give up soccer pretty soon if they get the message they simply have no natural born talent for it. Again, look at what they have the potential to improve on: "It seems like you have a hard time out-running people. How can we work on building your running skills or how can we figure out mental strategies to get you there faster?"
- Don't clap and cheer for every little thing your child does. We clap and cheer the first few times they do something. Once they've mastered something, phase out the praise.
- Don't praise when you know and they know that they haven't done their best. (If an actor got a standing ovation every time he performed, even when he knew it wasn't a great show, it would mean nothing. But when they are reserved for outstanding performances, they feel really good.)
- Also, don't overdo the superlatives. Telling a teenager she looks great today in the outfit she carefully chose is a nice esteem-building compliment. Telling her she's the 'most beautiful girl in the world' won't ring true. And she'll then doubt other compliments you give in the future.
- Don't just generically say "good job." Do give specific information about what was good about it. Specific praise helps them know you paid attention and you care.
- Or even better, ask them what *they* think is good about it. And ask how it could be even better.
- Don't be afraid to give constructive feedback. This doesn't mean just criticism: "that homework is a mess." Try "Good job of getting the homework done on time. But, it's hard to read. Next time, can you make it neater so it's easier for the teacher to grade?"
- Do be genuine. When you're moderately pleased by something, give moderate praise. When you're really excited by something your child has done, let that shine through.

Sources: "Inverse Power of Praise", an excerpt from [Nurture Shock](#) by Bronson and Merryman.

<https://nymag.com/news/features/27840/> Praise: <https://www.parentingcounts.org/development/is-there-a-right-way-to-praise-a-child/> Criticizing Praise, Alfie Kohn. www.huffingtonpost.com/alfie-kohn/criticizing-common-critic_b_1252344.html