



# Praise and Pre-schoolers

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## Are young children harmed by the wrong kind of praise?

Practica Parents are passionate about supporting their children to reach their full potential and most of us are familiar with concepts such as 'mind power' and 'the power of positive thinking'. We know that it's important to instill a good self-image in our children.

As a result we try to be as up building and motivating as possible. In fact, most of us encourage and praise our children with as much diligence as we feed and dress them.

This is all good and well, but, just as not all food can be rated as equally healthy, not all kinds of praise are equally beneficial – or even good for children.

In fact, researchers have found that the wrong kind of praise can be downright harmful – causing children to shy away from challenges and teaching them to be so concerned about what other people think of them that they lose out on the joy and excitement of learning.

As if parents don't have enough to be concerned about!

Although the idea that there are right and wrong kinds of praise is probably new to most parents, it is a topic that has been studied quite extensively by educationalists during the last few decades.

Many do's and don'ts have emerged from many of the studies and, after reading through the material, a parent can easily feel so scared to say the wrong thing that spending time with a child can feel like treading on a minefield.

With this in mind, I have sifted through the information for you and have identified the 3 most important tips in this regard.

As always, I have tried to make it practical. Keep in mind that babies and toddlers thrive on any kind of praise, so these tips are only relevant to children from 2-3 years onwards:

## Praising tip #1:

### DO praise kids for things that are within their power to change

Praise your child for having good manners, working hard, persevering at a task, for thinking of clever ways to solve a problem, for being a team player, for treating others with respect, following instructions, doing more than what was expected and other good choices that he has made. By praising him for things that are within his power to change, you are communicating to him that he has the power to make the right choices and that his efforts are recognized.

### DO NOT praise your child by telling him how smart or talented he is.

It is not healthy to respond to your child's successes with 'Look how SMART you are!'

Children easily get the idea that adults observe them from a distance, rating how they fare on various tasks, with the goal of stereotyping them into little boxes marked with signs 'genius', 'above-average', 'average', 'below-average' and 'stupid'. And it scares them. What if they are confronted with something that they can't do? Will adults see their failure as a sign that they are not as smart as once thought? Will a mistake lead to the loss of love and respect?

These kids don't want to risk losing the little 'gifted' tags that have been hung around their necks and as a result they avoid challenges (Mueller and Dweck 1998).

## Praising tip #2:

### DO be sincere and specific.

Wait for a real opportunity to praise your child. Then be specific and give information about what impresses you: "This picture is my favourite. I like how you took your time and used many different colours."

Keep in mind that, by giving information about what you appreciate, you are conveying a standard that is shaping how your child is going to act in future. So be careful to set reasonable standards and not to unintentionally inhibit your child with your comments. If you would, for instance, always say that you like a picture because he used blue and green, he may never use yellow and red again!

### AVOID overenthusiastic and undeserved praise.

Very young children are likely to take a parent's praise at face value, but older kids are a different story. As kids mature, from about 3-4 years of age, they become aware of your own possible motives for praising them and they respond negatively to insincere praise.

When you praise them in situations where they feel that they didn't really deserve the recognition, they may feel that you think they are in need of encouragement and that you are praising them because you feel sorry for them (Meyer 1992)

Your child may also infer that you are trying to be manipulative, and feel that you don't really understand him. (Henderlong and Lepper 2002).

## Praising tip #3:

### DO focus on your child as an individual.

Be truly interested and involved in your child's personal interests, growth and successes, independent of what other children like, do or achieve. Praise him when he does something right or masters something - not for outperforming other kids.

### DO NOT use praise that compares your child to others.

Children who are praised for outperforming others initially respond well by trying hard to make their parents proud, but they become so focused on winning that they don't learn to enjoy the activity itself and when they no longer win, they lose interest.

Many of these children also react by avoiding challenges, for fear of not being the best. This kind of praise doesn't prepare them for coping with failure and it doesn't teach them that making mistakes is an important and valuable component of learning (Elliot and Dweck 1988).

#### REFERENCES:

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