



By Karen Stephens

Praise: Like Sugar, It Should Be Sprinkled, Not Poured

You've heard the phrase, "Catch 'em being good." It's an important one. Short, sweet and to the point. I'm not sure who coined it, but it's worth a mint! The phrase provides us with a quick reminder to look for the positive in behavior, as much as (more than!) the negative.

Praise usually takes the form of a compliment. It's given after a person performs a task appropriately. After children follow directions caregivers often say: "Good job!" "Way to go!" "Good for you!" "Neat!" "Wow!" or sundry other feel good praise bits.

Praise isn't bad. We all like to bask in its glow. A little praise never hurts self esteem. It helps children take pride in accomplishment and responsibility. But there are dangers if we overuse praise with children. We may begin using it manipulatively, as if we are training little seals rather than thinking human beings. I've met children (and adults) who are excessively dependent on praise. They require (demand!) constant attention. They are overeager for approval from others. They do or say anything that will get them their quota of praise for the day. Result: It's hard to trust them.

Sometimes children are so dependent on praise, they won't perform (behave) without it. Some athletes suffer from this. When rewarded with victory celebrations, trophies, and media attention, they exercised to keep their bodies fit and healthy. But when the sports careers ended, they turned into couch potatoes.

These athletes were so conditioned to perform for external praise, they failed to develop self-motivation and self-discipline. Achievement for the sake of accomplishment and self-respect was not enough; glory (external praise) alone was the magic key to motivating performance. Children who are praise-dependent often expect to be praised for every little thing they do. If they don't get the praise via back pats, stickers, stars, candy, applause, presents, or money, they become resentful, pouty, whiney, and testy. (In other words, obnoxious.)

Alarmingly, some children receive too much praise for too little effort. Rather than being primed to excel, these children become discouraged. They don't strive beyond minimal expectations. Rather than becoming more independent and ambitious in setting and meeting goals, they become lazy and uninspired. They give up easily; they become defeatists. (And neighbors call them spoiled brats. Yikes!)

So, praise is like sugar. A little is okay, a lot hurts us. A child guidance technique I believe is more beneficial than general praise is referred to as encouragement. Capturing the difference between praise and encouragement can be tricky. Let me explain.

Praise is often laden with value judgments regarding an individual's worth as a person, "You are such a good girl. You are a nice person." In contrast, encouragement focuses on specific behavior: "You put all your books away. Now they won't get stepped on and torn. Way to be organized!"

Encouragement emphasizes self-pride rather than external rewards. The focus shifts from stressing the need to please others to the importance of meeting personal goals and expectations. Example: "You made it all the way through the obstacle course. Smart thinking. You can be proud of yourself!"

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Encouragement acknowledges effort as a child works toward accomplishment. Children are supported throughout the process of learning and excelling: “You’re passing food at our table without spilling. What good concentration.” Praise tends to focus primarily on the final product — on winning a trophy or ribbon. Taken to an extreme it’s easy for children to acquire the attitude that “winning is not everything; it’s the only thing.” They may perceive that developing a skill is only worthwhile when they can be better than everyone else. Chronically discouraged children think any means justifies the end in order to win and satisfy their need for praise. Praise dependent children are in danger of developing warped values regarding fair play and the spirit of true sportsmanship.

Encouragement highlights ongoing effort and self-discipline. Gradual steps toward competence are celebrated. Example: “You’re playing so gently with your baby sister. That’s a great way to help her trust you.” When we focus on effort, in addition to results, we help children realize that the process of attaining a goal can be as rewarding as achieving a goal. (Haven’t we heard as much from accomplished people who say success is a journey, not a destination?)

Encouragement communicates faith in a child’s abilities. It communicates positive expectations: “You’ve got a good eye for how pieces fit together. You’re going to get that puzzle together soon.” By now the difference between praise and encouragement should be clearer. Jane Nelson, in the book *Positive Discipline* sums it up this way: “The long-range effect of encouragement is self-confidence. The long-range effect of praise is dependence on others.”

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Do I think you should avoid praise altogether? Not on your life! I still use it as one way to communicate affection and admiration. There are times I just can’t help gushing about what a wonderful person I think my kid is. He’s been told many times we’re proud of him. But even more than expressing pride, even more than dishing out generous helpings of praise, we’ve tried to encourage all his efforts, be they large or small. We’ve emphasized that in the long run, our son needs to live life in a manner that makes him proud of himself. If he doesn’t march to the tune of his own drummer, he’ll be betraying the only person he can depend upon for an entire lifetime — himself.

Encouragement versus. Praise: Read More About It

- Raising a Responsible Child by Dr. Don Dinkmeyer and Dr. Gary McKay. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973)
- Children: The Challenge by Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D. with Vicki Soltz, R.N. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987)
- How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. (New York: Avon Books, 1980)
- Positive Discipline by Jane Nelson. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987)
- Positive Discipline for Preschoolers by Jane Nelson, Ceryl Erwin, and Roslyn Duffy. (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1995)

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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