



PRAISE

THE EFFECTS OF PRAISE: WHAT SCIENTIFIC STUDIES REVEAL ABOUT THE RIGHT WAY TO PRAISE TEENS

Many parents worry about the effects of praise. That too much praise will inflate the ego...make children “too big for their boots”. How today we recommend to parents that they praise their children all the time. Why? Because we think that praise is going to make our children better—more motivated, more confident, more inclined to tackle challenges.

But does it really work that way? Yes! Praise can be a powerful form of encouragement. For instance, parents who praise their preschool children for their good manners have children with better social skills (Garner 2006; Hastings et al 2007).

This is the same with teens. However, it's important to be sensitive to your teen's developmental level. Whereas very young children are likely to take your praise at face value, teens are a different story. As children mature, they become aware of your own possible motives for praising them. If they think you are being insincere, they may dismiss your praise. They may also be sensitive to being patronised or manipulated. So ...

- Be sincere and specific
- Insincere praise may harm self-esteem and damage relationships

WHAT'S THE RIGHT WAY TO PRAISE TEENS?

Good answers come from Jennifer Henderlong Corpus and Mark Lepper, psychologists who have analysed over 30 years of studies on the effects of praise (Henderlong and Lepper 2002). They determined that praise can be a powerful motivating force if you follow these guidelines:

- Be sincere and specific with your praise
- Praise teens only for the things they have the power to change
- Use descriptive (labelled) praise that conveys realistic, achievable standards
- Be careful about praising teens for achievements that come easily to them
- Encourage teens to focus on mastering skills—not on comparing themselves to others

Teens might think you feel sorry for them or that you are trying to be manipulative. Insincere praise might also send the message that you don't really understand your child (Henderlong and Lepper 2002). To prevent the appearance of insincerity, avoid frequent, effusive praise, and avoid praise that is sweeping or general. Teens are more likely to doubt it.



**USE DESCRIPTIVE (LABELLED) OR PRAISE THAT CONVEYS REALISTIC, ATTAINABLE STANDARDS**

Some praise is merely about making a judgment "Good job!" Other praise provides information about what the recipient did right: "I like the way you begin your essay by describing the problem and explaining why it's important." The latter is called descriptive praise, and it is thought to be more helpful than general praise. When you give a teen descriptive praise, you don't just tell them that they are doing well. You are giving them specific feedback, and you tell him something about your standards.

But it is an important not to overdo it, argue (Henderlong and Lepper 2002). The standards you convey should be reasonable. If you over-praise a teen (e.g. "You're amazing! I've never heard anyone play the piano better!"), you may send the wrong message. Your teen might conclude that your standards are superhuman. How can he possibly live up to that? Praise that conveys unrealistically high standards can become a source of pressure, and make teens feel inadequate.

It's been well-documented in cases where people are given tangible/material rewards each time they perform a particular behaviour (e.g., giving your child some money each time he eats broccoli). The feedback appears to re-set a person's attitude (Lepper and Henderlong 2000). However, brain studies reveal that social rewards (like praise) and tangible/material rewards (like money) activate the same regions of the brain (Izuma et al 2008). So, save yourselves some money and heap on those descriptive praise statements.

But the key point seems to be that praise must be given every time, for the behaviours you want to see. When praise is unexpected or spontaneous, it remains a powerful motivating force.

And remember that 5.6 positive comments are needed to 'repair' every negative comment that is directed at them ...



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