

## Don't Praise Your Children!

**"Good job!" is the worst kind of praise.**

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Please be prepared. I'm going to go on a bit of rant now. I just can't hold it in any longer. I see parents doing this constantly and it's killing me because they know not what they do and they are actually hurting their children's development.

What am I referring to? It's praise, that's what I'm talking about. Now I know what you're thinking: "What? Praise is bad? I can't praise my children? This I have to hear."

Okay, here goes. What is the most common praise you hear parents (and teachers and coaches) giving kids at home, on the playground, in class, and on the sports fields? "Good job!" "Good job" (and other variants such as "Way to go," "Nice job," and "That's great") have become knee-jerk reactions from parents whenever their kids do something worthy of acknowledgment. If I had a dollar for every time I hear that, I would be a rich man today.

What's the problem with "Good job?" Well, it's lazy praise, it's worthless praise, it's harmful praise. It has no value to children, yet parents have been brainwashed into thinking that it will build their children's self-esteem. Plus, it's the expedient thing to say.

Let's start with the purpose of praise: to encourage children to continue to engage in positive behaviors that produce positive outcomes. Now you can start to see the problems with "good job!" First, it lacks specificity. It doesn't tell children what precisely they did well and without that information they can't know exactly what they should do in the future to get the same outcome. Second, "good job!" focuses on the outcome rather than the process. If you're going to be lazy with your praise, at least say, "Good effort!" because it focuses them on what they did to do a good job.

Unfortunately, many parents have been misguided by the "self-esteem movement," which has told them that the way to build their children's self-esteem is to tell them how good they are at things. Unfortunately, trying to convince your children

of their competence will likely fail because life has a way of telling them unequivocally how capable or incapable they really are through success and failure.

The reality is that children don't need to be told "good job!" when they have done something well; it's self-evident. They do need to be told why they did well so they can replicate that behavior in the future to get the same positive outcome.

Research has shown that how you praise your children has a powerful influence on their development. The Columbia University researchers Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck found that children who were praised for their intelligence, as compared to their effort, became overly focused on results. Following a failure, these same children persisted less, showed less enjoyment, attributed their failure to a lack of ability (which they believed they could not change), and performed poorly in future achievement efforts. Says Dweck: "Praising children for intelligence makes them fear difficulty because they begin to equate failure with stupidity."

Too much praise of any sort can also be unhealthy. Research has found that students who were lavished with praise were more cautious in their responses to questions, had less confidence in their answers, were less persistent in difficult assignments, and less willing to share their ideas.

Children develop a sense of competence by seeing the consequences of their actions, not by being told about the consequences of their actions. The researchers Mueller and Dweck found that children who were praised for their effort showed more interest in learning, demonstrated greater persistence and more enjoyment, attributed their failure to lack of effort (which they believed they could change), and performed well in subsequent achievement activities. Rewarding effort also encouraged them to work harder and to seek new challenges. Adds the Clark University researcher Wendy Grolnick: "Parental encouragement of learning strategies helps children build a sense of personal responsibility for-and control over-their academic careers."

Based on these findings, you should avoid praising your children about areas over which they have no control. This includes any innate and unalterable ability such as intelligence, physical attractiveness, or athletic or artistic gifts. You should direct your praise to areas over which your children have control-effort, attitude, responsibility, commitment, discipline, focus, decision making, compassion, generosity, respect, love, the list goes on. You should look at why exactly your children did something well and specifically praise those areas. For example,

"You worked so hard preparing for this test," "You were so focused during the entire chess match," and "You were so generous for sharing with your sister."

Particularly with young children, you don't need to praise them at all. The best thing you can do is simply highlight what they did. For example, if your toddler just climbed a playground ladder for the first time, just say, "You climbed that ladder by yourself." Their smile of pride will tell you that they got the message you wanted them to get, namely, "I did it!" Nothing more needs to be said.

As another alternative to praise, just ask your children questions. You can find out what your children thought and felt about their achievement, for example, "What did you enjoy most about your performance?" and "How do you feel about what you just did?" Allow your children to decide for themselves how they feel about their accomplishments, enable them to reward themselves for their own good actions, and encourage them to internalize what they observed about their own achievement efforts.

Or really go out on a limb and don't say anything at all to your children. As I just mentioned, kids know when they do well. By letting them come to this realization on their own, they learn to reinforce themselves and they don't become praise junkies dependent on you for how they feel about their efforts and accomplishments.

Here is my challenge to you. First, next time you're at the playground or a youth sports competition, take note of what parents say to their children. I'll bet you hear "Good job!" (or some variation) constantly. Next, monitor what you say to your children in the same situations. Then, erase "Good job!" from your vocabulary. We've already established how useless it is. Finally, start to praise your children in the healthy ways I just described. When you have broken yourself of the "Good job!" habit, you can then pat yourself on the back and tell yourself, "Good job!"



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The goal of *The Power of Prime* is to be "disruptive." I want to look at issues in ways that upset the conventional wisdom. My hope is to initiate a conversation with readers that will offer new knowledge, perspectives, and insights that will challenge and extend the intellectual marketplace. Always entertaining, frequently thought provoking, sometimes controversial, and occasionally outrageous, I want *The Power of Prime* to be a place for readers to go where, after reading my posts, will say, "Mmmm, that was interesting."