Five Reasons to Stop Saying “Good Job!” (***)
Five Reasons to Stop Saying “Good Job!”

By Alfie Kohn

Note: An expanded version of this article was published in Parents magazine in May 2001 with the title “Hooked on Praise.” For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here—as well as a comprehensive list of relevant research—please see the books Punished by Rewards and Unconditional Parenting.

Praiser, listen to the research. You may not want to hear it, but it affects not only the people on the receiving end but also us—yourself and the child. If you wish to help a child grow in a way that is meaningful and satisfying, then keep on reading.

1. Manipulating children

Suppose you offer a verbal reward to reinforce the behavior of a two-year-old who eats without spilling, or a five-year-old who cleans up after herself. The child may do it because he wants a specific reward. Later, when he wants to fish for praise in the future. Do they help her to become more excited about what she’s doing in its own right— or turning it into a means to an end? Thelma Bierens, a professor of education at the University of Northern Iowa, refers to this as “sugar-coated control.” Very much like tangible rewards— or, for that matter, punishments —it’s a way of doing something to children that gets to comply with our wishes. It may be effective at producing this result (at least for a while), but it’s very different from a child who, for example, makes a classroom contribution out of sheer excitement and curiosity, not because he wants to impress anyone else.

2. Creating praise junkies

Not only is it unethical to buy a child’s co-operation. The more we say, “I like the way you….” or “Good ______ing,” the more kids come to rely on it. The more we praise, the more we reward the child for doing something he should be doing anyway. And the less likely he is to see his achievement as a true measure of his own ability. The more we say, “Well done!” and “You’re a good pupil!” the more likely he is to value only what we value, and the less likely he is to look for the reasons he’s acting that way.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, the point here is not to call into question the importance of supporting and encouraging children, the need to love them and hug them and help them explore and experience their feelings.

3. Stealing a child’s pleasure

Praise does not give children the freedom to enjoy the results of their own efforts. Praise for sharing ignores these different motives. Worse, it actually promotes the less desirable motive by making children more likely to do what we say— not what they want to do. Why does this happen? Partly because the praise creates pressure to “keep up the good work” that gets in the way of doing so. Partly because their performance is all the more likely to be judged by others when they hear that they’ve done something right. It means we’re offering attention and acknowledgement and approval for jumping through our hoops, for doing things that please us, not for doing things that please them.

4. Losing interest

"Good painting!” may get children to keep painting for as long as we keep watching and praising. But, warns Lilian Katz, one of the country’s leading authorities on psychology’s reduction of all of human life to behaviors that can be seen and measured. Unfortunately, this ignores the unique responses of individuals; it sanctions the adult the right to make judgments about the child, to figure out the reasons he’s acting that way.

5. Reducing achievement

Researchers keep finding that kids who are praised for doing well at a creative task tend to stumble at the next task — and they don’t do as well as children who weren’t praised to begin with. Lest there be any misunderstanding, the point here is not to call into question the importance of supporting and encouraging children, the need to love them and hug them and help them explore and experience their feelings.

It’s not a matter of memorizing a new script, but of keeping in mind our long-term goals for our children and watching for the effects of what we say. The bad news is that the effects of what we say are often negative— as well as a comprehensive list of citations to relevant research — please see the books Punished by Rewards and Unconditional Parenting.

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