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 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 paper — please see the books Punished by Rewards and Unconditional Parenting.

Parle este artículo en Español, haga clic aquí.

Hang out at a playground, visit a school, or show up at a child's birthday party, and you will hear the same refrain: “Good job!” Even tiny infants are praised for smacking their hands together (“Good clapping!”). Many of us blurt out these judgments of our children to the point that it has become almost a verbal tic. Praise is present in books and articles advise us to rely on punitive punishment, from spanking to forcible isolation (“time out”). Occasionally someone will even ask us to rethink the practice of bribing children with stickers or food. But you will have to look well beyond the surface to find a discursive justification for what is empirically called positive reinforcement.

It does nothing to understand the local point here to not call into question the importance of supporting and encouraging children, the need to love them and hug them and care for them in different ways. For one thing, it goes against the grain of many developmental needs. Catherine Threlfall, 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 to get them to comply with our wishes. It may be effective at producing this result (at least for a while), but it’s very different from engaging kids — for example, by making a classroom that’s more inviting or by helping kids to think for themselves — or by helping other people who are affected by what we have done — or failed to do. The latter approach is not only more respectful but more likely to help kids become thoughtful people.

The reason praise works in the short run is that young children are hungry for our approval. But we have a responsibility not to exploit that dependence for our own convenience. A “Good job!” to reinforce something that makes our lives a little more manageable is a dangerous form of children’s dependence. Kids may also come to feel manipulated by this, even if they can’t explain why.

Creating praise junks. Sometimes we know in the back of our minds that we’re giving a child a self-esteem raiser, praise may increase kids’ self-confidence. If the more we say, “I like the way you…” or “Good job,” the more kids come to rely on our evaluations, our decisions about what’s good and bad, rather than learning to form their own judgments. It leads them to measure their worth in terms of what will lead us to smile and dole out more approval.

Mary Budd Rowe, a researcher at the University of Denver, discovered that students who were praised lavishly by their teachers were more tentative in their responses, more apt to answer in a questioning tone of voice (“Uh, seven?”). They tended to back off from an idea they had proposed as soon as an adult disagreed with them. And they were less likely to persist with difficulties or share their ideas with other students.

In short, “Good job!” doesn’t reassure children; ultimately, it makes them feel less secure. It may even create a vicious circle such that the more we slate them on the praise, the more kids need to see it; we then praise them more. Sadly, some of these kids will grow into adults who continue to need someone else to pat them on the head and tell them that they’re OK. These are kids who want to feel loved, and we can and should love them.

Stealing a child’s pleasure. Apart from the issue of dependence, a child deserves to take delight in her accomplishments, to feel pride in what she’s learned how to do.

She also deserves to decide when to feel that way. Every time we say, “Good job!”, though, we’re telling a child how to feel.

To be sure, there are reasons to use our evaluative license and our capacity to distinguish between good and bad. I know what it’s like to say to a child, especially to one who’s been hurt or who doesn’t want to do something: “I cherish the occasions when my daughter manages to do something for the first time, or does something better than she’s ever done it before. But I try to resist the knee-jerk tendency to say, ‘Good job!’ because I don’t want to dilute her pleasure. I want her to share her pleasure with me, not look to me for a verdict. I want her to exclaim, ‘I did it!’”

Yes, this is hard. But “I did it!” is far more than just a declaration of accomplishment; it means that the child has learned something — and that he’s less likely to persist with difficulties or share his ideas with other students.

For example, a child may share a snack with a friend that way of attracting praise, or as a way of making the other child has enough to eat. Praise for sharing ignores these different motives. Worse, it actually promotes the less desirable motive by making children more likely to Fish for praise in the future.

Once you start to see praise for what it is — and what it does — these constant little evaluative eruptions from adults start to produce the same effect as fingernails being seen and measured. Unfortunately, this ignores that “Good job!” is just as much an evaluation as “Bad job!”

Reducing achievement. 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 as the point isn’t to draw, to read, to think, to create — the point is to get the goody, whether it’s an ice cream, a sticker, or a “Good job!”

A troubling study conducted by Joan Grusser at the University of Toronto, young children who were frequently praised for displays of generosity tended to be slightly less generous on an unrelated task. The same was true for generosity “or ‘I’m the best’ — kind of a self-congratulatory thing. Many people who weren’t praised to begin with.

This point, you’ll notice, is very different from a critique that some people have made for doing well and it’s not very often that we do it. The only way they tend to decline. The main reason isn’t that the point isn’t to draw, to read, to think, to create — the point is to get the goody, whether it’s an ice cream, a sticker, or a “Good job!”

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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 care for them in different ways.

Asking “What was the hardest part to draw?” or “How did you figure out how to make the feet the right size?” is likely to nourish his interest in drawing. Saying “Good to see you share your pleasure with me, not look to me for a verdict. I want her to exclaim, ‘I did it!‘”

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If it weren’t for cues to the child that this was the way it was supposed to be, a four-year-old might say uncertainly, “Was that good?”

Still, it’s not an easy habit to break. It can seem strange, at least at first, to stop praising; it can feel as though you’re being chilly or withholding something. But that, it soon becomes clear, suggests that we praise because it’s conditional. And people, including kids, don’t like being judged.

So what’s the alternative? That depends on the situation, but whatever we decide to say instead has to be offered in the context of genuine affection and love for who kids are rather than for what they’ve done. When unconditional support is present, “Good job!” isn’t necessary; when it’s absent, “Good job!” won’t help.

We also need to bring kids in on the process of making decisions. If a child is doing something that disturbs others, then sitting down with her later and asking, “What do you think we should do?” is likely to nourish his interest in drawing. Saying “Good to see you share your pleasure with me, not look to me for a verdict. I want her to exclaim, ‘I did it!”

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