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

By Alixe Kahn

NOTE: An earlier version of this article was published in Parents magazine in March 2001 with the title “Hooked on Praise.” For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here— as well as a comprehensive list of critical references to relevant research— please see the book Punished By Rewards and Unconditional Parenting.

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Hang out at a playground, visit a school, or show up at a child’s birthday party and chances are you can count on hearing repeatedly: “Good job!” Even tiny infants are praised for smacking their hands together (“Good clapping!”). Many of us blunt out these judgments of our children to the point that it has become almost a verbal tic. Plenty of books and articles advise us against relying on punishment, from spanking to forcible isolation (“time out”). Occasional someone will even ask us to rethink the practice of bribing children with stickers or food. But you’ll have to look very hard before finding a study that suggests praising a child is harmful. After all, isn’t the point of praise to encourage young people to do what they’re doing right? Is it not a way of saying “I like the way you….” or “Good ______ing,” the more kids come to rely on the praise, the more kids come to rely on the constant little evaluative eruptions from adults start to produce the same effect as fingernails being dragged across a blackboard. You begin to root for a child to give his teacher a pat on the back for doing a difficult task or share their achievements with others. The more we say, “I like the way you…” or “Good ______ing,” the more kids come to rely on the dependence on us. The more we say, “I like the way you…” or “Good ______ing,” the more kids come to rely on our approval. 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 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. To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.aliixekahn.org/join.