



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Praising Young Children Effectively

Praise from parents helps young children both to feel good about themselves and to learn appropriate behavior. Lucy Daniels Center has some suggestions about helpful ways to praise young children.

Adapting praise: The Lucy Daniels Center distinguishes two forms of praise: "communication of parental pride" and "support of children's pride." Parents express parental pride when they show their pleasure with their child's behavior or thoughts. Parents support their child's pride when they clarify their child's own feelings of pride. The following examples illustrate these two forms of praise:

Kate, a 2 1/2-year-old, built a castle with colored blocks and announced, "I used every color." Her mother exclaimed, "Your castle is wonderful. You used so many interesting colors, and I can see how good you feel about what you made!" Although her own approval and pleasure were also conveyed, Kate's mother's comment supported her daughter's pride by highlighting Kate's good feeling about her choices and achievement.

Kate truly loved to build castles. On another occasion her mother said, "I am so proud of how hard you work at making these wonderful castles." Kate's mother communicated parental pride by emphasizing her own approval and pleasure.

Parental praise for children up through 18 months should express parental pride. Beginning in late toddlerhood, and especially by the time a child turns 2, we recommend that parents begin to supplement their expression of parental pride with support of their child's pride. As the years progress, we encourage parents to increasingly focus upon the support of their child's pride, although continued expressions of their parental pride will always be

wise and welcome. An increasing focus upon a child's inner and autonomous experience will help support his or her development of a wellspring of good feeling and free his or her self-esteem from excessive dependence upon the opinions of others.

Because the communication of parental pride has deep roots in the earliest parent-child interactions, parents can always provide their child with a boost by offering such praise. Older children who are regressed can be supported by the provision of parental pride. This story illustrates such help:

Five year-old Ethan was successfully managing a grocery store trip. His father supported Ethan's pride about managing throughout the shopping. When they arrived at the checkout line, Ethan's father said, "You did a great job. I am really proud of you. Keep up the good work in this long line." Ethan's father instinctively knew that Ethan might regress because he was emotionally fatigued from his effort to manage and would benefit from the boost provided by an expression of parental pride.

Parents support children most helpfully by praising what matters to children, such as when Kate's mother focused upon her use of many colors. Sometimes, parents can learn what matters to a child by promoting a discussion. Praise that is attuned to children's perspective will support their good feeling about successfully fulfilling their goals, preferences, and desires.

Finding praiseworthy behaviors: Everyone wants children to behave well. Praising their good behavior helps motivate children to choose constructive behavior. Parents can also help children learn to make good choices through the use of appropriate praising of the constructive efforts that take place during an episode dominated by misbehavior, along with providing limits and consequences for the misbehavior.

Finding praiseworthy behaviors within episodes of misbehavior is challenging. Parents can identify and praise efforts to behave even when they occur as part of a behavioral sequence that culminates with misbehavior. A parent's ability to find such praiseworthy behaviors requires their commitment to a belief that their child prefers to behave rather than to misbehave, to please their parents rather than to displease them. Parents who convey this faith in their child's present and future goodness also convey a vision, confidence and basic affirmation that children will feel, identify with and use as the

orienting and defining basis of their behavior. The following illustrates such an approach:

Three year-old Janie and her mother were choosing a breakfast cereal at the grocery store. Before entering the store, Janie's mother had told Janie which cereals would be acceptable choices. However, Janie insisted on Crunchies, an unacceptable choice, and fell to the floor while shrieking her demands. Janie's mother swept Janie up and returned to their car. She explained that Janie's behavior resulted in her not being able to choose any cereal. Janie's mother's clear disapproval of Janie's behavior was a further consequence. Janie's mother added, "I am sorry that you had the tantrum. I know how bad that feels for you. You tried to not have a tantrum by being polite the first time that you asked for Crunchies. You also found a way to not kick me, because you knew that you feel badly when you hurt me. You tried hard and you are doing better. I feel good about that, and I hope that you do also."

Janie's mother found a helpful balance between providing limits and consequences for Janie's misbehavior and recognizing Janie's constructive effort. Parents sometimes worry that such a recognition of effort would undermine discipline. Rather, such an approach supports discipline by helping children understand both their effort and their failure to meet parental expectations. Such an approach also helps children maintain confidence in the face of disheartening misbehavior. Furthermore, parents show children that they are allies in their effort to grow up, and that they do not lose contact with their children's goodness and efforts even when they, as parents, are disappointed, frustrated or angry. The parental ability to express both appreciation and disappointment provides children with helpful modeling for approaching relationships and other life situations, which are rarely all good or bad, pure success or failure.

Praising well is an art. Parents should always try to see the praiseworthy, to help their child to see it as well, and in so doing, will be helping their child to develop positive and deserved good feelings about herself or himself and those they interact with.