



# Not in Praise of Praise

by Kathleen Grey

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*"I want my baby to grow up to have high self-esteem so I praise him when he does things. Babies need to know that we admire them and think they are special. Praising them is a good way to let them know that. I think praise not only helps children learn to do things well, it also makes them want to be good." — Mother speaking of her six month old infant*

*"There is a little girl in my classroom who is two and a half years old and is always into everything. The other teachers and I have to put her on time-out a lot because she is so hard to handle and she has to learn to be good. We use praise with her every time we notice her doing something good so that she'll learn what's right and what's wrong." — Teacher in toddler center*

*"My grandson has cerebral palsy and has to work extra hard to do even the simplest things for himself. His parents always look for things to praise him about and tell him he's doing a good job. They try to make sure that everyone who works with him is willing to do the same thing. They feel that he won't keep trying if they don't praise him a lot." — Grandmother*

*"My son has to learn how to behave from us. We don't like spanking and shaming so we use praise to make him act right. I think it's a much better way to teach children than the way I was reared — with a lot of criticism and blame." — Father*

Using praise to teach children what is expected of them is a relatively new kind of teaching and parenting technique. Less than a century ago it was commonly assumed that praise would spoil children and that criticism and disapproval would strengthen their character and turn them into good citizens (Miller, 1983).

Today it is commonly accepted that self-esteem is the root of strong character and good performance (Nelson,

1987; Clarke, 1978). From that realization has come the obvious extrapolation that good teachers and parents should therefore build self-esteem if we want our children to have a strong character. And doesn't self-esteem mean having a good opinion of yourself? Wouldn't it help our children have a good opinion of themselves if we point out what's good about them and tell them frequently how good they are?

## Building Character — Themes, Old and New

There are two themes that link both the *old way* and the *new way* of building character and teaching good behavior. The first theme is the idea that how children think about themselves and evaluate themselves is dependent upon what adults tell them about themselves and has little to do with their own evaluation of themselves. This point of view supposes that adult evaluations are more *right* than a child's, and that adults have the responsibility to mold the way children perceive themselves by stating their evaluations frequently.

The second connecting theme is the constant emphasis on the concepts of goodness, badness, and obedience. There is good or bad behavior, good or bad self-concept, good or bad feelings, good or bad thoughts. There is an undercurrent of belief that goodness and badness are definable by adults, simply by virtue of being an adult, and have nothing to do with children's age, developmental level, psychological needs, or internal motivation. Adults are responsible for telling children what is good and what is bad and for using whatever *consequences* are necessary to see that children comply with this message. Children's obedient behavior, then, is seen as a measure of whether the adults have done a *good job* or *bad job* of defining and talking about goodness and badness.



Current thought, as illustrated by the introductory statements of parents and caregivers, recognizes that praise is an important and powerful form of communication. It can nourish the spirit and add a sheen to daily experiences. It is a potent payoff for effort. But . . . it is a judgment, nonetheless. Because children value the opinion of adults so highly, frequent evaluative comments, even when positive, can foster undue dependence on the external judgment of others, causing them to devalue their own perceptions about their competence and capabilities. Used indiscriminately, praise loses its potency and becomes empty and meaningless.

### **Praise in the Classroom — My Story**

In my own teaching, both with children and adults, I don't use praise words very much any more. They often sound manipulative and insincere, even when I use them judiciously. And there are times when I don't like receiving praise for exactly the same reason.

The conviction that we should not risk putting anything of ourselves out into the world — through writing, teaching, singing, or simply just being — unless we know for sure that it will meet with approval is a devaluing, self-defeating state of mind. Yet it is a product of the old discipline of criticism which often imprisoned creative energy and perverted personality. It is no wonder that we have turned to praise to mend our ways as we search for more effective means of teaching and rearing our children humanely.

To many of us, praise seems like such a good, positive way to get children to behave. It's a way to make them feel good about themselves so they'll try harder to do what they should. We congratulate ourselves that we have abandoned the use of criticism in exchange for teaching with praise. What we fail to see is that praise is simply the positive face of criticism, that both presume the right of one person to impose judgment on another.

For many years, my ideal of good teaching was to use praise frequently and admonition or criticism rarely. These were my primary tools for controlling a group of children. It was not unusual for me to end a day of teaching feeling totally exhausted and tense, having spent most of my time trying to be one step ahead of the children, and searching for words that would cause them to behave in line with my ideas about how they should behave. I often had a headache and, in my earliest years of teaching, a heavy, barren feeling as well. I was constantly occupied with a mental image of what I expected of children and of how to make them want to behave according to those expectations. Whatever interest I had

in knowing their needs was simply so I could use that knowledge to motivate them to meet my expectations. I was preoccupied with getting them to adopt my goals and expectations for their behavior.

I'm not sure why it was so important to me that they meet my expectations and behave as I saw fit. Certainly I was sure that I knew how they should behave. And I felt very deeply my responsibility to impress that upon them. I was also very sure that total permissiveness doesn't make anyone feel good, even when they protest mightily against limits on their freedom. Yet, in my zeal to avoid total permissiveness, I operated out of a position of excessive control . . . what I later came to perceive as simply the flip side of permissiveness.

I think that is where I made the mistake. For certainly I could see that I was making mistakes. The level of energy I poured into my teaching usually produced clingy whiners or out-of-bounds troublemakers and my classrooms were either noisy and chaotic or excessively quiet and strained . . . and I was exhausted and unfulfilled. I knew that many of my children were resisting me harder than they would if I didn't have expectations about their behavior and that some of them were denying some of their own needs in order to fit themselves into the niche my expectations created for them. It was obvious to me that my expectations for these children were not good for them, yet I knew that an absence of expectations would not be good for them either!

### **Reflective Listening as Image Builder**

Then I learned about reflective listening and the world opened up for me. This is a respectful and reflective communication style that had its genesis in Thomas Gordon's (1987) "active listening" as described in his book *Parent Effectiveness Training*. I discovered that reflecting back to children what they are doing, and what I perceive that they are feeling, reinforces their sense of themselves in such a way that they feel strengthened and validated as potent, competent, worthwhile human beings.

This kind of communication revealed to me something that I had glimpsed only occasionally before . . . that children come into the world with an intense desire to participate in the human race, to learn its rules and protocols, and to find a niche where their selfhood can be uniquely expressed. This meant that I could trust them to want to grow; no longer did I have to *make* them want to do that. I began to see that my role was to be aware of this desire in them and to communicate my support of it honestly and forthrightly.



All these realizations didn't come at once, of course; there was no "aha, now I understand" kind of experience. What actually happened was that the reflective listening style of communicating felt so clear, uncomplicated, honest, and real that I just sank into it with a sense of great relief. It was like dropping a pebble into a still pond. From that time, the ripples that traveled outward in ever widening circles were the increasingly frequent experiences of connecting with the children, of watching their dawning understanding, and the evident pleasure in being able to behave in prosocial ways. Even when I had to set limits, I experienced the companionship that comes with genuine connection and the shared knowledge that the limits were set in the interest of continued growth.

Gradually I came to realize that reflective listening leaves no room for manipulation and that this fact is the source of its potency. Although I sometimes found myself trying to use it to manipulate, I quickly learned that when I did so, it *didn't work*. In fact, I began to realize that the sense of my communications "not working" could actually be a signal that I was attempting to manipulate the children. This brought the realization that as long as my goal was to cause a certain preconceived behavior, whatever communication strategy I used would be unproductive and exhausting. On the other hand, I saw that if my goal was simply to participate in the process of a child's growth, without manipulation and a preconceived agenda, a likely by-product of that joint endeavor might be productive and socially-competent kinds of behaviors, some preconceived and others totally undreamed of. And, most important of all, those behaviors would be self-engendered out the child's own desire to participate effectively.

## Some Negatives of Praise

So what does all this have to do with praise? Simply this . . . praise as it is commonly used, expressed through an excess of *wow words*, is too frequently a manipulation. As such, it breeds resistance and suspicion (which may be only half consciously felt) and acts to weaken the connection between the praiser and the praised. And for many people, it sets up a puzzling dilemma — "If I do this again so I can get this praise again, will I be doing it of my own accord or because I'm hooked on having this person's praise?"

Another hazard of praise is the tangled situation that is familiar to anyone who has reared or taught young children. I want to validate this child so I praise some act or way of being only to discover that the child wants to hear the praise again and tries to elicit it by repeating the

behavior I had praised. But what if it was an act for which I have lost my enthusiasm? Do I pretend I didn't see the bid for more praise? Do I fake the enthusiasm to make her feel good (this is especially hard when I faked it to start with)? Or shall I be brutally honest and tell her it isn't cute when she does it over and over again? In other words, how do I deal with the obvious need for praise in the child who looks to me for praise for an act performed over and over again long after I have lost my admiration for it? And most important of all, what is the message this experience conveys to the child . . . that she must dream up something more stunning in order to elicit those addicting *wow words* from me again? Is this what *making her feel good about herself* is all about? Is that really building self-esteem? It looks like abject dependence to me.

"So why not just use an enthusiastic voice and a firm 'good job' to praise a child's efforts?" you may ask. "Wouldn't that help him feel good about himself and reinforce his efforts to do well?" Perhaps it would, but what if he actually didn't do a good job, yet you knew he tried hard and you wanted to reinforce his efforts? Reflective listening is especially eloquent in such a situation because of its focus on *what's so*, not on an arbitrary standard of what ought to be. Describing what you noticed about the child's effort and the progress he is making toward his goal communicates your interest in and support of him more powerfully than any kind of praise could do.

Praise is often empty because of our tendency to go on automatic pilot when we're busy and to say, "Great!" "Good job!" "Oh, isn't that pretty!" "You're such a good painter!" without stopping to think about the child's reality (other than the assumption that he needs praise). Such praise doesn't tell the child what it is you're affirming as good, nor does it tell him why you think it was good. In fact, it doesn't even tell him what you mean when you say something is good . . . does it mean that it's morally right? . . . or that it's what you like? . . . or what makes it good? Wouldn't it be more informative, and therefore more satisfying (to you and to him), if he could hear his effort described and his intention noted, no matter what level of performance he achieved?

As an adult, have you ever had the feeling that your job or classroom performance was below par, only to hear a "Good job" from your supervisor or to find an "A" on your essay? Did you then retain your original judgment of your performance or did you immediately revise it to fit with praise you'd received from "someone with authority"? Did you wonder about the praise and what



you had done to justify it? Did the praise help you understand why it was a “good job”? Or did it just make you wonder what you should do next time in order to win such a comment again?

## Can We Make a Child Feel Good About Himself?

Let’s go back to the earlier discussion of why we use praise . . . to make children feel good about themselves. What is the underlying fallacy in this statement? It’s the idea that we can make people feel a particular way. That’s a terrible burden to carry around . . . the supposition that if someone isn’t feeling good about herself that I have the power, hence the responsibility, to find a way to make her feel good about herself again. So I praise her with “You did a good job!” or “Good for you!” Does that validate who she perceives herself to be? Can she use such comments to build a reliable standard of competence within herself, one that she can self-reference so that she isn’t constantly dependent on others’ opinions?

A teacher is trying to reinforce the behavior of a child who has voluntarily carried out a classroom rule. She says to him, “Good job, Tom! You’re doing just what you’re supposed to do, aren’t you? You’re always such a good boy.” The message to Tom is not about his intrinsic worth, but about his value *when he does what his teacher wants him to*. If Tom’s teacher truly wants to affirm Tom’s intrinsic worth, as he expressed it through his desire to participate competently in classroom culture, she might say, “I saw you carry all the dirty paint brushes to the sink, Tom. You had to make three trips to get them all! I sure appreciate your help.”

If Tom regularly hears the unspoken message in the first scenario, how is he likely to apply it to himself? How do you think this message will affect his ability to make judgments for himself? Would he have a different sense of his competence if he regularly received the message in the second example?

In my own experience over the last ten years, I have found repeatedly that the unease I sometimes feel in a praise situation can usually be explained by this new understanding of how we use praise to manipulate children and one another. In fact, it’s even getting easier for me to catch myself when I use praise in this way — and reflective listening always helps me communicate more forthrightly. One of my university students summed it up for me recently when she commented, “I really like it

when you use reflective listening with us. You expect us to always be so tuned-in to the children and to tell them what we notice about their activities and their feelings. It feels awfully good to me, and I learn so much, when I realize you’re that tuned-in to me!” Her comment left me glowing. Not only had she recognized my effort to support her, she also told me how much it meant to her. I didn’t feel praised, I felt truly validated.

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