

## Not in praise of praise

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with cartoon by Peter MacMullin

Most adults have been taught that, when we want children to develop a healthy self-esteem, we need to praise them for their behaviour or achievements. In this paper, I argue that instead we must avoid praise and replace it with acknowledgment.

### THE NATURE OF SELF-ESTEEM

From their earliest days of life, children learn about themselves from our reactions and feedback to them. They develop a *concept* or description of their personal qualities and, when our feedback is judgmental, acquire a set of sometimes punitive beliefs about how they 'should' be (a set of *ideals*).

Therefore, self-esteem can be illustrated in the following way:



Self-esteem as the overlap  
between the self-concept and ideal self

### ROUTES TO LOW SELF-ESTEEM

This diagram illustrates that people (of any age) can develop low self-esteem in one of three ways:

1. We lack skills that we value.
2. We have the skills that we value, but are not aware of these qualities.
3. In what is known as perfectionism, we demand so much of ourselves that no one on the planet will achieve all that we expect.

The first cause is not as relevant as we might think because, when individuals lack a skill that they value, in the case of children we can teach them it and, in the case of adults, we can simply avoid that activity. (If I discover that I am not proficient at architectural drafting, for example, I don't become an architect.) The other two sources of low self-esteem are enduring. They can emerge in early childhood and persist all our lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGING WITHOUT PRAISE

Adults can prevent or repair both major causes of low self-esteem in children by giving children information about their personal skills and qualities (so that their self-concept enlarges) without, however, judging the children or their achievements. When we judge children, we raise their ideals, teach perfectionism, and consequently, risk lowering their self-esteem. (You might picture the circles above spreading further apart as ideals become too demanding).

Therefore, adults need to acknowledge and celebrate children's successes, without praising these. This form of feedback will *verify* the children's own assessment that they have achieved something worthwhile, *highlight* their successes so that they notice these, and *expand* on what they have achieved – for example, by pointing out that, not only is their block tower very high but also, when it fell down, they had another go: they can persist. This feedback allows children to 'park' information about themselves in their self-concept.

Acknowledgment (otherwise known as informative feedback) differs from praise and other rewards (which are judgmental) in *describing* children's skills and qualities – without *judging* these, or implying that children must continue to achieve at that standard in order to be considered worthy.

Acknowledgment differs from praise in the following ways:

1. Acknowledgment *teaches children to evaluate their own efforts*: 'What do you think of *that?*...Was that fun?...Are you pleased with yourself?...You seem pleased that you did that so well'. In contrast, praise approves of work that meets *adult* standards.
2. Unlike praise, acknowledgment *does not judge* children or their work, although you could offer an opinion of their achievement. For example, 'I'm impressed that you tried something new...I admire that you had another go'.
3. Acknowledgment is a private event that does not show children up in public, compare them with each other or try to manipulate other children into copying a commended child. Acknowledgment simply describes in private what the adult appreciated: 'Thanks for sitting quietly today in group time: it helped the other children to enjoy the story', or, 'I appreciate that you helped pack the toys away'.

### Guiding principle

When you want children to develop a healthy self-esteem, celebrate and acknowledge their efforts, but do not praise them.

Like praise, however, acknowledgment is not value-free: we *do* know that particular skills and dispositions will be useful to children both now and in the future, and we hope that our children will come to value these. But we cannot impose our values on them.

Also, as with praise, you can still tell children that they are terrific, although not for doing something that pleases you, but simply because they

are wonderful. With acknowledgment, you want to share your pleasure in their company; with praise, you want to manipulate them into doing things your way or into being a particular kind of person.

Acknowledging children's achievements or their considerate behaviour requires no new skills on your part. It requires only the same language that you use for the adults in your life. It asks you not to patronise children but to treat them with same humanity that you would use towards a person of any age. For example, if a friend gained a promotion, you would not say, 'Good girl' but would congratulate her; when a friend helped you out by picking up your children from school when you were held up at work, you would not comment that she was a good friend but instead might say, 'Thanks. I appreciate it'.

### **TIPS FOR ACKNOWLEDGING CHILDREN'S ACHIEVEMENTS**

Ask children how they feel about what they have achieved:

- Are you pleased?
- What do you think of *that*?
- Are you happy with that?

When children are saying or giving nonverbal messages that they are pleased, reflect that:

- You look delighted!
- You seem very proud of yourself
- You look very pleased

When appropriate, add your opinion (but not a judgment):

- Well, I agree with you!
- I agree that you can be very pleased with yourself
- I think it's special too

Give information or feedback in the form of *I-verb*:

- I admire...
- I respect...
- I value...
- I'm impressed that...
- I appreciate...

Intend to *congratulate*, not manipulate:

- Congratulations!
- Hey! You did it!
- Wow! Look at that!

Express *appreciation*:

- Thank you!
- I'm grateful that...
- I appreciate that because...

Focus on the *process*, not the product:

- I admire that you tried something new
- I'm impressed that you had another go
- Looks like you really worked at that

*Verify* children's own assessment that they have achieved something worthwhile, *highlight* their successes so that they notice these, and *expand* on what they have achieved:

- I agree that it's quite an achievement!
- Did you know you could do that?
- And not only have you finished it, but you worked on it for ages

Use natural manners, without patronizing children. For example, in response to a child's thanks:

- You're welcome!
- It's a pleasure
- I hope you enjoy it

## EXAMPLES OF PRAISE VERSUS ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The following examples illustrating the distinction between praise and acknowledgment avoid one-up-one-down language in which adults adopt the stance of expert with the right to judge others. Instead, acknowledgment allows children to monitor and assess their own performances. This will both allow them to develop a comprehensive picture of their own skills and qualities, and to apply their self-management skills to regulating their own behaviour.

**Action:** **A child has helped to pack up his or her toys.**  
**Praise:** You're a good helper.  
**Acknowledgment:** Thanks for your help.  
I appreciate your help.  
Thanks: that's made my job easier.  
Thanks for packing away so quickly. Now there is more time to play outside.  
Thank you. I know you weren't in the mood to pack up and I appreciate that you did it anyway.

**Action:** **After much effort, a child has built a tall tower of blocks.**  
**Praise:** Well done! That's terrific!  
**Acknowledgment:** Congratulations!  
Wow! Look at *that!*  
Hey, you did it!  
You look very pleased with that!  
I'm impressed that you kept trying when the blocks fell over so often.  
I admire that you figured out that the bigger blocks had to be at the bottom.  
You look very proud of that. I agree with you: I think you deserve to be.

**Action:** **A child who has completed a painting comes to you asking 'Is this good?' while looking pleased with it.**  
**Praise:** Hey, that's great! Good for you.  
**Acknowledgment:** You look delighted with that! I agree with you: I think you should be pleased.  
Looks like you enjoyed doing that.  
It looks to me like you planned your painting very carefully.  
What's *your* favourite part?

**Action:** **A child who has completed a painting comes to you asking 'Is this good?' while looking dispirited.**  
**Praise:** Hey, that's really good. You've done well.  
**Acknowledgment:** I can see you're disappointed with it.  
What don't you like about it?  
How come it didn't turn out as you'd hoped?  
Do you want to fix it, or just leave it for now?

<b>Action:</b>	<b>A child has reluctantly shared an item of play equipment with a peer.</b>
<b>Praise:</b>	Good boy for sharing.
<b>Acknowledgment:</b>	Thanks for sharing with Sam. She looked sad that she had nothing to play with. Sam seems really grateful that you let her have a turn. I admire that you gave Sam a turn. That's not easy to do at your age.

### THE BEST RESPONSE TO 'GOOD BOY'

(Cartoon by Peter MacMullin and inspired by Alfie Kohn)



### CONCLUSION

Giving children feedback that describes their achievements, rather than judging these, gives children information about who they are, without taking that extra step of implying that they *must* behave in particular ways for us to value them. In this way, acknowledgment safeguards their self-esteem. In a separate paper, I report on a considerable body of research findings that using acknowledgment rather than delivering praise or other rewards, also safeguards children's motivation.

### FURTHER READING

- Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise and other bribes.* (2nd ed.) Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour.* (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.