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Knowing When to Administer Emotional Medicine

by Jacob Azerrad, Ph.D.

The well known child psychologist Haim Ginott in his book, *Between Parent and Child*, makes the following statement about praise:

"...Praise, like penicillin, must not be administered haphazardly, there are rules and cautions that govern the handling of potent medicines - rules about timing and dosage, cautions about possible allergic reactions. There are similar regulations about the administration of emotional medicine."

Praise is in fact a powerful medicine, particularly for children. Parents praise their children naturally. But do we really know how to praise, when to praise, and what should be praised?

Dangers of too much praise

At first your child needs more words of praise, sincere praise for ordinary behaviors. It isn't long before he needs considerably less praise, since we're attempting to prepare the child for a world in which praise is not given repeatedly for all things that are praise worthy, but one that looks upon too frequent praise as insincere. Pats on the back don't occur all that often.

If you praise too much you will discourage the development of what we might call "self-praise," the child's ability to know without being told that he is doing well.

Once praise has taught a child to take his own worth for granted, energy need not be wasted on thoughts and feelings of self-doubt, but can be used to work toward productive goals.

Prescriptions for Praise

Telling a parent to praise a child is like a doctor telling a sick person to take some medicine for what ails him without specifying the name of the medicine, the dosage, and the length of time it should be taken. Medicine, like praise, sounds good, but without a few instructions both prescriptions are equally worthless and potentially harmful.

The directions for giving praise are simple, if you want to encourage appropriate behaviors:

- Be specific
- Give 100 percent praise

"You were very good" doesn't tell a child much, although it's clearly praise. "You were very good when you helped your brother read that story. That's being thoughtful and grown-up; I like to see that" tells the child exactly what he's done and why it pleases you.

Often what parents think of as praise is in reality loaded with implied criticism. Since what parents pay the most attention to is behavior that rocks the boat, when a child does behave well "for a change," it's behavior viewed in comparison to what is usual. Almost unconsciously, a parent will offer praise for a brief moment of quiet, positive behavior in exactly the wrong terms - praise that's loaded with subtle criticism.

Praise is valueless unless it is complete praise, tied to the specific behavior you want to encourage.

Praise as criticism

Here are some examples of "praise" that's really criticism, and how better the incident might be praised.

Non-Praise: You played very nicely this afternoon for a change. Real meaning: I didn't notice what you did that was so nice, I'm just happy you didn't fight and argue the way you usually do.

"Playing nicely" doesn't say much to a child, and moreover, "for a change" isn't praise at all but an implied criticism of usual behavior. The child has no incentive to repeat what was "nice" and basically what he's been told is that not being noticed is what pleases his parent.

Real Praise: You played very nicely this afternoon. I liked the way you showed Jeff how to glue the new model airplane together and then paint it. People like friends who are helpful.

Non-Praise: It's about time you picked up your room. Real meaning: You never pick up your room when I ask you to.

It's no praise at all that does no more than comment on the fact that the child has obeyed a request, especially when it doesn't give any reason for the value of doing a chore.

Real praise: You picked up your room. It looks terrific. I like the way you put all your toys together in one place.

Non-Praise: You have four A's and a B on your report card. That's good, but we've got to get that B up there. Real meaning: Those four A's are good, but they're not good enough for me. You won't measure up in my eyes until you get straight A's.

Praise that is contingent upon perfection is without value. No one is perfect, and in spite of the belief that holding up ultimate goals will make a child try harder, it simply confirms the suggestions that he'll never be good enough.

Real praise: I'm so proud of you for getting four A's on your report card.

Non-praise: I'm glad to see you sharing with your brother for a change. Real meaning: You're a selfish person.

Children believe what they're told about themselves. If you suggest negative qualities, the child will begin to think of himself that way. It is important to communicate a specific, positive message. I saw what you did; I was interested in the things that you did; what you did pleased me; what you did is valued behavior.

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