

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Praising Children

Question: I have read that praising my child is important for her self-esteem, but then I have also read that too much praise can spoil my child. I'm confused. How should I praise my child?

You can find ways to authentically praise your child while, at the same time, promote the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

We typically think that children who are praised a lot will feel better about themselves, but this is not necessarily true. It's how we praise children that matters. Carol Dweck of Stanford University found that adults who praise children for their personality ("you are smart" or "you are so talented") develop what she calls a fixed mindset. They begin to believe that these characteristics are inborn and can't be changed. As a result, they want to hold onto these labels and become less willing to try things that are hard where they might not seem as smart. On the other hand, children who are praised for their effort ("you tried so hard") or their strategies ("you figured out how to put on your sock by yourself"), develop a growth mindset, where they see their abilities and intelligence as something that can be changed. Children who hold a growth mindset are more likely to try really hard in the face of challenges.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Praise effort and strategies, not intelligence or personality.

Rather than praising your child's personality or intelligence ("You're so 'artistic' or 'athletic'"), criticizing him or her ("You are lazy"), or attributing their accomplishments to luck, you can praise your child's efforts or strategies. When your child sees that she or he can try and learn something new, your child will learn to feel good about himself or herself.

2

Help your child set his or her own challenging goals and to work toward them.

Taking on Challenges includes believing that we can do things even when they are hard. Encouraging your child when he or she is working hard toward meaningful goals is important. It is best not to praise your child all of the time for everything because the praise becomes less special and thus has less impact. Children will learn to work diligently on something they want to accomplish when they are intrinsically motivated rather than doing something for approval.

3

Be a role model and promote curiosity.

You can set goals and work toward them and share your experiences, strategies and feelings about the process with your child. It is important to share why you are working toward the goals (personal satisfaction, new knowledge, etc.) so your child can see that praise is not the reward, but rather, the experience and process are.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests the importance of setting appropriate expectations for success.

4

Set appropriate expectations.

Setting expectations for what your child can accomplish that are not too low or too high is critical to developing competence and confidence. If you are overprotecting your child, and if he or she is too dependent on you, or if expectations are so high your child never can succeed, he or she may feel powerless and incapable of controlling the circumstances in his or her life.

5

Help your child find ways to contribute.

Self-esteem is a key feature of leading a fulfilling life. Children develop a positive sense of self if they think they are making a contribution. Help your child find things to do that makes him or her feel good, like taking care of the dog or making a card for someone who feels sick.