

Positive Reinforcement:

Praise and Encouragement

Good job Ben! Way to go Laura!

Do you find yourself frequently using phrases like these with children? They are great positive reinforcing phrases; however, adults who work with children need to be aware of the difference between words of praise and words of encouragement.

Praise may be defined as verbal reinforcement that focuses on evaluation or approval. Praise tends to place emphasis on the outcome over the effort. In the extreme, it may lead children to equate their worth with the praise that they receive.

Praising a child can build a positive self-concept when children are praised for appropriate behavior or for excellence; however, unrestrained use of praise may result in children believing that they are OK only if someone tells them that they are OK.

Inappropriate use of praise can have negative consequences for children. Children may begin to doubt the sincerity of the speaker when praise is overused. Children will realize that not everything they do is deserving of praise. Sometimes, a child will deny or contradict a compliment, placing the speaker in a difficult situation, that is, having to come up with a reason why the praise is valid. Another child may interpret praise as threatening, that is, there is anxiety that this one time was a fluke and they could not possibly repeat the accomplishment in the future. A child might feel manipulated by the speaker, that is, the child is being complimented because the adult wants to control the child's behavior.

Encouragement focuses on action rather than the person. It demonstrates understanding and appreciation of one's individuality rather than establishing an expectation of conformity.

There are three steps in giving a child encouragement. First, describe what you see or feel. "Tell me about this interesting drawing," or, "how did you get everyone involved in the game?" Next, allow time for a response. This gives a child an opportunity to identify his/her skills and may cause the child to praise himself in the process. Finally, reinforce the child's perceptions. If the child is particularly pleased with his use of color, you can reinforce that by saying that the colors are a striking aspect of the picture. Or, if a child says that she did a good job of explaining the game, you can compliment her enthusiasm or powers of persuasion.

Positive reinforcement helps children develop a positive self-concept. Adults should use both praise and encouragement appropriately to help children realize their potential.

Reference:

Dreikurs, R., Greenwald, B. & F. Pepper. (1982). *Maintaining sanity in the classroom: Classroom management techniques*. New York: Harper & Row.