

Giving Children Feedback

“Look at me! Look at me!” children call out, asking their parents to pay attention and tell them how they’re doing. Parents often answer, “That’s great!” or “You’re terrific!” because they want their children to feel good about themselves. But there’s another, easy-to-use way to build your child’s self-esteem that also encourages good behaviour and independence. It’s called “**descriptive praise**.”¹

Describe instead of judging

When you use descriptive praise, you sound more like a news reporter than like a film reviewer. You **say what you see**, without using judgmental words like “good,” “wonderful,” or “perfect.” For instance, if a child has put his toys away, you can say: “I see you put all your blocks, trucks and cars in their boxes on the shelves.” To help your child understand the effect his actions have on you, you can also report on **the way it makes you feel**: “I feel more comfortable in a neat room like this.”

Concrete feedback

Descriptive praise tells children exactly what you have noticed and what you’d like to see more of. Your positive feedback increases the chances they’ll do more of what you want.

Drawbacks of judgments

Can’t parents tell children they’ve done a great job? Certainly, if they then describe *exactly what* was great. For instance, you could say, “Fantastic! You did four somersaults in a row!” to let your child know you noticed what he did. On the other hand, feedback like “You’re a fantastic gymnast!” is the kind of general judgment that can cause problems.

- If we always praise with words like “marvellous,” some children may worry that our expectations are too high. They know they aren’t *always* that wonderful. They may even do something wrong, just to show us that we shouldn’t expect them to be perfect.
- At some point, children realize that there are children who are stronger, faster or more capable than them. If we continue to tell them they’re “the best,” they will be confused rather than complimented.
- If everything they do is “great,” children may start to not believe us. For instance, if we say their piano playing is “beautiful” when in fact they just made three mistakes, they will either think we weren’t listening, or that we don’t know what we’re talking about.
- If we can call them “good,” we can also call them “bad.” Overall evaluations like this put children under a lot of pressure.

Separate the person and the action

When a child hears general praise like “You’re such an angel,” it sounds like a comment about who she *is*. More helpful feedback describes what the child *does*: “When you sing that lullaby softly to the baby, she really quiets down.” The same applies for feedback when the child is doing something we don’t like. Instead of “You’re such a devil,” we can describe what we see: “The baby cries when you take her toy. You need to give her another one.”

Recognizing effort

Descriptive praise allows you to compliment a child for trying, not just for success. For example, “You’re really working hard on getting that puzzle together. You just aren’t giving up.” It also helps children appreciate their progress: “When you started swimming lessons, you didn’t put your head under water. Now you can hold your head under to a count of four.”

Combat perfectionism

Some children have such high standards for themselves that they have trouble accepting compliments from other people. Because descriptive praise reports the facts of what you see and how you feel, it helps these children look at their achievements more realistically.

Reduce dependence

When you make overall judgments, your child depends on you for approval. “Am I good, am I good?” he needs to ask. But when you give feedback that describes his actions, you help him see his own strengths. For example, when you tell your child, “You cleared up your crafts so that we could eat dinner on the kitchen table,” he can say to himself, “I know how to put things away when I need to. I can help out.” He learns to evaluate his own behaviour and to make improvements based on clear standards. Children who don’t depend on other people’s opinion of them are much less influenced by peer pressure.

Show you care

At first, it takes a bit more effort to use descriptive praise. You have to really pay attention to pick out the features you want to describe back to your child. The detail you notice sends a clear message that you think what your child does is worth paying close attention to. When you get into the habit, you will soon see the results. Your child will do more of what you describe and will gain the confidence to recognize herself when she has done well.

by Betsy Mann

¹ Faber, A. & Mazlish, E. *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* (1999) Avon Books