

Praise, encouragement and rewards

No matter how old your children are, your praise and encouragement will help them feel good about themselves. This boosts their self-esteem and confidence. Sometimes rewards can be useful too, especially if you want to encourage good behaviour.



Praise

Praise is when you tell your child what you like about her or her behaviour. It goes a long way towards helping your child feel good about herself.

Descriptive praise is when you tell your child exactly what it is that you like. For example, 'I love the way you shared your Lego with your brother just now'. Descriptive praise is best for boosting self-esteem and building good behaviour – when children get praise for behaving well, they're likely to want to keep behaving well.

You can **praise children of different ages for different things**. You might praise a younger child for leaving the park when asked, or for having a go at tying his own shoelaces. You can praise teenagers for coming home at an agreed time, or for starting homework without being reminded.

Encouragement

Encouragement is **praise for effort** – for example, 'You worked hard on that maths homework'.

Praising effort can encourage your child to try hard in the future. But you can also use encouragement before and during an activity to help your child do the activity or behaviour. For example, 'Show me how well you can put your toys away' or 'I know you're nervous about the test, but you've studied hard. No matter how it turns out, you've done your best'.

Some children, especially those who are less confident, need more encouragement than others. Encouragement is particularly important for older children.

Rewards

A reward is a consequence of good behaviour. It's **a way of saying 'well done'** after your child has done something good or behaved well. It could be a treat, a surprise or an extra privilege.

Rewards can make your praise and encouragement more effective in encouraging good behaviour. Most behaviour is influenced by the consequences that follow it, so when you reward your child's behaviour, the behaviour is more likely to happen again in the future.

If you'd like to use a structured approach to rewards, you can find more information in our article on [reward charts](#).



Sometimes it's easier to criticise than it is to compliment. Bad behaviour is more obvious than good behaviour – you're much more likely to notice when your child is yelling than you are to notice when your child is quietly reading a book. Try to pay attention to the good behaviour, too!

Using praise to change behaviour

You can use praise as a tool to help change difficult behaviour and replace it with desirable behaviour.

The first step is watching for times when your child behaves the way you want. When you see the desirable

behaviour, or another behaviour you like, immediately get your child's attention.

Then **tell your child exactly what you liked** about the behaviour. You can praise effort as well as achievement – for example, 'It's great how you used words to ask for that toy'. You could even look for ways to reward the desirable behaviour – for example, give your child a high five or special cuddle.

At the beginning, you can praise every time you see the behaviour. When your child starts doing the behaviour more often, you can praise it less.

Tips for using praise, encouragement and rewards

- **When you feel good about your child, say so.** See if you can give your child some words of encouragement every day. The small things you say can build up over time to have a big effect on your child.
- **Describe what it is that you like.** This is called 'descriptive praise'. When you say exactly what you're happy about, your child knows what you mean. For example, 'I like the way you've organised your room. You've found a spot for everything' or 'I love the picture you drew. You really know how to put colours together'. And describing what you like is much more genuine and convincing than vague praise such as 'You're a good boy'.
- **Praise your child for his strengths.** Children have their own unique set of strengths (and weaknesses). Try to appreciate your child's good points. Try to avoid comparing one child to another, because this can lead to feelings of resentment or create unrealistic expectations.
- **Encourage good behaviour with praise, rather than pointing out the bad.** This means trying to do more praising than criticising.
- **It takes a lot of praise to outweigh one criticism.** Experts suggest trying to praise children six times for every one time you criticise them.
- **Look for little changes and successes.** If you wait until your child has done something perfectly to give a compliment, you might find yourself waiting forever.
- **Accept that everyone's different, and love those differences.** Encourage each child to develop and feel excited about particular interests. Help your child develop a sense of pride and confidence in her choices or activities.
- **Surprise your child with a reward for good behaviour.** For example, 'Thanks for picking up the toys – let's go to the park to celebrate' or 'Thanks for helping me prepare dinner. You can choose what we have for dessert'.
- **Praise effort as well as achievement.** Recognise and praise how hard your child is trying – for example, 'You worked really hard on that essay' or 'Thank you for remembering to hang your coat on the peg'.

Frequently asked questions about praise, encouragement and rewards

Will my child get a 'big head' if I praise him too much?

Some parents worry that if they praise too much, their child will get conceited or over-confident. Children feel good and are much more likely to repeat behaviour that earns praise, and that praise nurtures their self-esteem and confidence. The major risk is giving your child too little praise, rather than too much.

Will my child start depending on praise to feel good?

You might be worried that your child will start needing the approval of others to feel good. This isn't the case. In fact, children who are criticised all the time are more likely to seek approval to feel good.

By using praise, you're showing your child how to think and talk positively about herself. You're helping your child learn how to recognise when she does well and to pat herself on the back.

Why can giving praise feel like hard work?

Using praise can be an effort, and you might feel awkward at first. But if you do it regularly, it'll soon feel natural and normal.



Try making your praise dependent on your child's behaviour, rather than your feelings. You might also find your feelings begin to follow your behaviour – that is, the more you look for



good behaviour to praise, the more positive you'll feel.

If I praise too much, won't it lose its impact?

Using descriptive praise works because you're telling your child exactly what you like about his behaviour when he's done something you like. Praise can lose its impact if it's vague, rather than targeted, or if you use it when your child hasn't done anything. Your child might then learn that he doesn't have to do anything to be praised.

Is a reward the same as a bribe?

Many parents might feel that giving their child rewards for good behaviour seems a bit like bribery – but bribery and rewards aren't the same.

The difference is that a bribe is given before the behaviour you want, and a reward is given after. Rewards reinforce good behaviour, but bribes don't. For example, as a reward for keeping her room tidy, you might let your child choose what's for dinner.

Rewards can be very effective (especially initially) but shouldn't be overused. If they're needed very often, it might be helpful to rethink the situation – are there any other strategies that you could try to encourage the behaviour you want? Or it might be that the task or behaviour is too hard for your child.



For more ideas and strategies, you might like to read our articles on [encouraging good behaviour in children](#) and [encouraging good behaviour in teenagers](#).



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Last updated or reviewed

02-11-2011