

Praising Your Children

How often do you think about the amount and type of praise you offer your child? The wrong kind of praise, or praise used too frequently or infrequently can cause difficulties. Sometimes we think that it is not possible to over praise a child because we think constant praise will build a child's self esteem. However, there is a real world for the child outside of the home and a child's peers may not be as praise giving as his or her parents. Other children are usually quite truthful and blunt about the feats of their peers. A child constantly praised at home may feel placed on a pedestal only to be knocked off outside the home.

In an article in "Parents Magazine", educational consultant Fred Elle Maynard listed some dos and don'ts of praise. First the don'ts:

- Don't praise by comparison ("You're the best swimmer on the team"). It may encourage unnecessary competition or fear of failing next time.
- Don't praise constantly. If everything a child does is terrific, wonderful, the best, you will run out of superlatives and the child will become blasé about applause.
- Don't praise indiscriminately. Children who are veteran meet swimmers know when a swim is good or bad. Parental ecstasies over mediocre performances can either make children cynical or cause them to feel like frauds.
- Don't praise so extravagantly that children feel pressure to go on shining. Over enthusiastic applause destroys a good motive for activity (to please oneself) and substitutes a poor one (to please parents).
- Don't use sarcastic or "backhanded" praise. "Well, you did all flip turns for a change." "You touched with two hands! I can't believe it."

The best praise to use is encouragement. Encouragement helps build a child's confidence and autonomy while praise can be more manipulative, emphasizing what the adult wants. Encouragement allows kids to "own" their accomplishments and to find within themselves the strength and desire to do their best. The following are Maynard's dos:

- Do be specific. Instead of using words that evaluate ("What a great swim"), describe in concrete terms what you see: "You swam a best time."
- Do describe the behavior and its consequences. For example, "Thanks for getting dressed and out of the locker room so quickly. Now we have more time to go shopping."
- Do focus on the child's effort, not the product. "You practiced hard for this meet and it really paid off."
- Do point out how your child has progressed. "A 200 IM! You couldn't have done that last year!"
- Do give control back to the child. Let the child do the evaluating. Rather than say, "I'm so proud of you," say, "You must feel so proud that you all backstroke turns."