

## Praise vs. Encouragement, Gratitude Article

Most of us believe that we need to praise our children more. However, there is some controversy regarding this point. If we always reward a child with praise after a task is completed, then the child comes to expect it. However, if praise is not forthcoming, then its absence may be interpreted by the child as failure. According to [Naomi Aldort](#), "Children who are subjected to endless commentary, acknowledgment, and praise eventually learn to do things not for their own sake, but to please others." But the avoidance of all praise is not a solution either. According to [Jan Hunt](#), it is the intention behind the words. "Genuine praise" would be loving words that arise spontaneously and warmly from the parent's heart, without the thought of manipulating the child's behavior. I believe, the real message we want to communicate is encouragement, encouraging a child (or any learner, including adults) for trying even in the face of failure. Dreikurs et al, furnished the following example sentences to illustrate the difference between praise and encouragement.

Praise	Encouragement
Your are the best student I ever had.	You are a fine student. Any teacher will appreciate and enjoy you.
You are always on time.	You sure make an effort to be on time.
You have the highest score in the class on this exam.	You did very well on this exam.
I am so proud of you.	You seem to really enjoy learning
You're the best helper I ever had.	The room looks very neat since you straightened the bookshelves.
I'm so proud of your artwork.	It is nice to see that you enjoy art.

One of the main differences between praise and encouragement is that praise often comes paired with a judgment or evaluation, such as "best" or "highest" in these examples. In some earlier web pages, I provided lists of "[encouraging words](#)" but in hindsight, some of what I said could have been interpreted as "evaluative praise," which I wanted to avoid. One reader of this webpage has also noted that not all of Dreikur's examples of encouragement illustrated above are completely free of evaluation. However, you can be the judge, and test out your own responses to my "[encouragement machine](#)." While one has to think more, it may be better to use "descriptive recognition," giving a more precise description of what you wish to encourage.

According to Bolton (1979, pg 181):

Evaluative praise is the expression of favorable judgment about another person or his behaviors: "Eric, you are such a good boy." Evaluative praise often utilizes superlatives like "wonderful," "marvelous," "superb." and so on. This kind of praise, especially when it constitutes a favorable global evaluation of the person, is rarely constructive.

According to Ginott (1965):

Evaluative praise.....creates anxiety, invites dependency, and evokes defensiveness. It is nonconductive to self-reliance, self-direction and self-control. These qualities demand freedom from outside judgment. They require reliance on inner motivation and evaluation.

According to Taylor (1979):

Praise	Encouragement
stimulates rivalry and competition	stimulates cooperation and contribution for the good of all
focuses on quality of performance	focuses on amount of effort and joy
evaluative and judgmental; person feels "judged"	little or no evaluation of person or act; person feels "accepted"
fosters selfishness at the expense of others	fosters self-interest, which does not hurt others
emphasis on global evaluation of the person-"You are better than others."	emphasis on specific contributions - "You have helped in this way."
creates quitters	creates triers
fosters fear of failure	fosters acceptance of being imperfect
fosters dependence	fosters self-sufficiency and independence

A real life experience, illustrating these principles, was provided by the well know cellist, Gregor Piatigorsky (1965). He reminisces in his autobiography, how he felt after receiving what we denote here as "evaluative praise" on one occasion and "descriptive recognition" at a later date, from the famous cellist Pablo Casals:

"Mr. Casals." I was introduced to a little bald man with a pipe. He said that he was pleased to meet young musicians such as Serkin and me. Rudolf Serkin, who stood stiffly next to me, seemed like myself, to be fighting his diffidence. Rudi had played before my arrival, and Casals now wanted to hear us together. Beethoven's D-Major Sonata was on the piano. "Why don't you play it?" asked Casals. Both nervous and barely knowing each other, we gave a poor performance that terminated somewhere in the middle.

"Bravo! Bravo! Wonderful!" Casals applauded. Francesco brought the Schumann Cello Concerto, which Casals wanted to hear. I never played worse. Casals asked for Bach. Exasperated, I obliged with a performance matching the Beethoven and Schumann.

"Splendid! *Magnifique!*" said Casals, embracing me.

Bewildered, I left the house. I knew how badly I had played, but why did he, the master, have to praise and embrace me? This apparent insincerity pained me more than anything else.

The greater was my shame and delight when, a few years later, I met Casals in Paris. We had dinner together and played duets for two cellos, and I played for him until late at night. Spurred by his great warmth, and happy, I confessed what I had thought of his praising me in Berlin. He reacted with sudden anger. He rushed to the cello, "Listen!" He played a phrase from the Beethoven sonata. "Didn't you play this fingering? Ah, you did! It was novel to me...it was good... and here, didn't you attack that passage with up-bow, like this?" he demonstrated. He went thorough Schumann and Bach, always emphasizing all he like that I had done. "And for the rest," he said passionately, "leave it to the ignorant and stupid who judge by counting only the

faults. I can be grateful, and so must you be, for even on note, one wonderful phrase," I left with the feeling of having been with a great artist and a friend.

Not all situations require this kind of descriptive recognition. If we are just having a conversation, and wish to encourage the speaker to tell his story, we can use minimal encouragements, which are short phrases letting the speaker know you are listening (Bolton, 1979, pg 43-44):

Minimal Encourages	
Tell me more.	You betcha!
Oh?	Yes.
For instance...	Really?
I see.	Gosh.
Right.	And?
Then?	Go on.
So?	Sure.
I hear you.	Darn!

Just repeating what a person says can be encouraging. For example, while teaching a young boy how to do the back dive, we had the following conversation. He is standing with his back facing the pool:

Sam: It's scary.

Mr. Yen: Yes, its scary.

Sam: This is hard.

Mr. Yen: Yes, its hard.

Sam: Boy, is this scary!

Mr. Yen: Very!

Sam: This is really hard!

Mr. Yen. Very hard.

At this point, Sam gets enough courage to try, and he does the back dive. After he gets out of the water, he is beaming and exclaims:

Sam: I did it!

Mr. Yen: Yes, you did it!

Just watching children can be encouraging. After practicing a few more times:

Sam (says proudly): I can be a showoff!

Mr. Yen: Yes you can.

In this example, I hardly said anything earthshattering. I just remained agreeable to what Sam was saying. I did not deny his feelings. It would be much worse to deny his feeling and say "It's not scary." I did not contradict him. I did not reply "No, it's not hard," which people often automatically say. And after the dive, I merely agreed with what he said, "Yes you did it." I did not say anything evaluative. The sum total of his experience is that he feels successful. He concludes for himself in his own mind, that because he did something that was in his estimation, both "scary" and "hard" that he is "terrific!" That is what you want. I did not have to say "Terrific!" He says it to himself "I am terrific!"

Test

Some more examples of praise versus encouragement, and a [test](#) for you to take.

Update (2005)

[Alfie Kohn](#), wrote an article entitled: [Five Reasons to Stop Saying "Good Job!"](#) He laments that on any school playground, you can hear one praise repeatedly spoken to the children: "Good Job!" The question I ask, at this point is, "do the children really want to hear this? " If you are busy doing your work, do you want your boss to say to you "Good job!?" I don't think so. Below, I have constructed a simple continuum of possible responses to something you are doing, beginning with a response you don't want to hear, to ones, of increasing preference.

Bad job! ...Good job! ...You did it! ...How did you do it?

When I was growing up, I was very good at math, and by seventh grade, I was a couple years ahead of my peers. I don't ever remember my mother saying "good job" to me. So how did it happen. Well, basically, she bought me math books. Once a quarter, at my elementary school, the teachers gave each student a [Scholastic Book Services](#) catalog. I checked which books I wanted, and this was collated with the other students, and a group order was put in. It was encouraged that we order as many we could, because apparently there was a discount. I remember, typically I ordered more books that the rest of the class combined! My mother basically just indulged me, and I could then pace myself as to what I wanted to learn. She had no idea what kind of math I was studying, but I assumed she was pleased that I was keeping myself busy. So one way of encouraging a good job, is to provide access to resources.

I was also a good chess player, and taught by my Uncle MK, who was addicted to the game. In the beginning, he would give me a handicap, two rooks and a queen, and as I began winning, he reduced the handicap until there was none. Now, if I am with young students, I do the same. In fact, for beginning first grade students, who know nothing of the game, not even how the pieces move, I say, "you can take eight, or even 15 pieces off the board!" This is absolutely hilarious and exciting, especially with other students looking on, who are shouting all kinds of advice. If I did not give this handicap, no one would play me, because they would say there is no chance of winning, so why try.

In both of the above examples, the encouragement occurs because there is a chance of improvement, at the student's pace. This supports the student's need for autonomy, allowing them to pursue their goals at a rate which they decide as *intrinsically* rewarding. If my mother chose the books for me, I probably would not have progressed as far.

As [Robin Grille](#) writes "Happiness can only be derived from doing what is intrinsically rewarding to us, and this does not require others' applause. Do we want kids to become reward-addicts, crowd-pleasers, and recognition-seekers, or do we want them to be self-motivated, faithful to themselves, following their own interests? If the latter is true, then the way is not to praise them but to appreciate them."

## Gratitude

In an interview with [Yogi Times](#), Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the [Center for NonViolent Communication](#), was asked:

"YT: You mentioned a moment ago about celebration instead of praise what is the difference?"

Rosenberg: "In [NVC](#), we consider praise and compliments a [violent form of communication](#). Because they are part of the language of domination, it is one passing judgment on another. What makes it more complex is that people are trained to use praise as reward, as a manipulation to get people to do what they want. For example, parents I work with, teachers, managers in industry have been trained in courses and by other people to use praise and compliments as rewards. In a family, we are taught that if you praise and compliment children daily, they are more likely to do what you want. Teachers do the same in school to get children to work more. And managers in industry are trained to do this, showing them how to use praise and compliments as rewards. To me, this is a violent form of communication because it is using language as a manipulation that destroys the beauty of sincere gratitude. So in NVC we show people to make sure that before you open your mouth to get clear that the purpose is not to manipulate a person by rewarding them. Your only purpose is to celebrate. To celebrate the life that has been enriched by what the other person has contributed to you. Then, once conscious to make clear three things in this celebration; first, what the person did that enriched your life, not a generality, like "you're so kind, beautiful, or wonderful" but what concretely did they do for you. Second, how do you feel inside about their action? And third, what need of yours was fulfilled inside you by their contribution?"

I had just finished saying this to a group of teachers, telling them about the dangers of using praise and compliments as rewards. I showed them how to do it this other way and I must not have done a good job of explaining this because afterward, a woman came up and said, "You were brilliant." I said, "That is no help. I have been called a lot of names in my life some positive and some far from positive and I could never recall learning anything of value from someone telling me what I am. I don't think anybody does but I can see by the look in your eyes you want to express gratitude." She said, "yes," and I said, "I want to receive it but telling me what I am doesn't help." She said, "What do you want to hear?" "What did I say in the workshop that made life more wonderful for you?" She said, "You are so intelligent." I said, "That doesn't help." She thought for a moment and then opened her notebook and said, "Here these two things that you said really made a difference." I said, "How do you feel?" She said, "Hopeful and relieved." I said, "It would help me if I knew what needs of yours were met." She said, "I have this 18 year old son and when we fight, it is horrible. It can go on for days. I have been needing some concrete direction and these two things have made such a difference for me."

When I give this example, people can see the difference between praise and gratitude and how different in value both are. In the case of celebration, you can trust it is being done with no manipulation so that you will keep doing it or say something nice about them. Instead, it is really coming from the heart. It is a sincere celebration of the exchange between two people."

The above concepts are now explained in Rosenberg's latest book " Speak Peace in a World of Conflict."

AHA!

Rosenberg's response really gives me an "aha" experience. When we are saying "good job," what we really want to do is communicate gratitude and celebration. If you look back at the Casal's example above, in Piatigorsky's second encounter, he was given specific details of what impressed Casals, and that information made all the difference. Too bad that so much suffering had to occur between the two encounters. Similarly, in Rosenberg's example, when the teacher specifically told him what he said that was helpful, and how she felt, the two connected in gratitude and celebration.

Rosenberg uses rather strong words, that praise is a "violent" form of communication, part of a language of domination. This is because we live in a ["domination system,"](#) a hierarchical society that depends on centralized authority governing the masses. The larger the number of people you can control, the more powerful your society is. And one way to control people is through language. Originally, overt use of violent force/physical punishment by the "sovereign power" (i.e. king and his henchmen), was used to control societies. Now more covert forms of violence such as manipulative language (i.e. praise, shaming, inducing guilt, advertising, propaganda etc), and "disciplinary power" (i.e. electronic surveillance) are used to control society. Unfortunately, because we grow up with this, violence occurs out of consciousness and out of awareness.

What was it like before the rise of large societies? Research on the rapidly vanishing hunter/gatherer societies, having no centralized authority, indicate that the absence of violence is the norm. In such societies (Semai, Orang Asli), if a child says just once to an adult "I don't feel like it," ([bood](#)), the adult just walks away, and does not try to force the child to do something it does not want to do.

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