



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Part I: How to talk back to your children - Giving praise and criticism

Our job as parents is similar to the coach of a sports team - influencing behavior by both praise and criticism. How we go about giving such feedback significantly influences our success.

Complimenting your kids seems to be simple, but many parents make key mistakes that undermine the effectiveness of their praise.

1. **Keep it real.** Recognition quickly loses its value if it is dispensed too freely, or given in situations just to make a child feel better. If your child feels badly for doing poorly in a sporting event, don't lose credibility by praising her poor performance.
2. **Don't get your kids praise-addicted.** Be careful how often you praise your children. Frequent praise is most important for younger children, or when kids are just acquiring a new skill. This appears to be a generational issue, with younger people use to an inordinate amount of recognition. One colleague at work mentioned that it seems like younger workers "want to get a certificate or something just for showing up for work!"
3. **Be specific.** This is important whether you are praising a toddler or a teen. Be specific about the behavior you are praising. Don't simply tell your child she was awesome, but tell her what specific behavior you are rewarding. "Anna, your story was really cool. I really liked your creative ending and the way you described the main character."
4. **Be timely.** Praise is most effective when it is given immediately after the behavior you want to reward. For toddlers, that means virtually immediately. For others, it generally means within the same day.
5. **Reward effort, not just accomplishment.** Two children bring home report cards, both with a B average. One child worked incredibly hard, and the B average represents their best report card. The parents appropriately rewarded that child's accomplishment because of the effort that

went into it. For the second child who is academically gifted, the B average was their worst ever report card. Correction rather than compliments should occur with that youngster.

6. **Public or private?** When it comes to praise, one size doesn't fit all. Some kids like public recognition while others find it embarrassing. Figure out what works for your youngster, which varies significantly depending upon the age and temperament of your child.
7. **It doesn't have to be verbal.** There are lots of ways to recognize kids other than verbal praise - a gentle hug, a smile, a knowing look, a text message or a hand written note. What's important is to individualize rewards and vary your praise so that it maintains its meaningfulness.

Praise is the fun part, but good coaches also need to criticize and correct. Part two of this series will describe how to criticize your child without destroying their confidence.

Gregory Ramey, Ph.D., is a child psychologist and vice president for outpatient services at The Children's Medical Center of Dayton. For more of his columns, visit www.childrensdayton.org/ramey.