

Many parents and teachers are aware of research relating to the negative effects of rewards and punishments, but aren't sure how to guide children in other ways. Bribes, praise, rewards, threats, punishments, withholding and other behaviorist techniques (that have dominated parenting education and teacher training, unfortunately, through the end of the 20th century in the U.S.) are still the prevailing advice in most parenting books and teacher education today. And even when we want to move away from over-praising, we may have verbal habits that are difficult to break. We might be able to catch ourselves, but we are not always sure about what we want to say to children instead.

It may be helpful to think in terms of what forms of **observation** (simply stating what you see), **acknowledgment**, **validation**, and **appreciation** will suffice in different situations. When a child cries "Look at me!" there is generally a wish to connect rather than an invitation for assessment or critique. Instead of "good job!" we might say "I see you!" or even "Yes" while making eye contact and nodding. This assures your child that you are present and connected while bypassing many pitfalls. We want to avoid training children to be compulsively performative and to be continually seeking praise (or applause!). Studies show that children who are praised for intelligence learn to take fewer risks and avoid challenges in the attempt to maintain image. Children may also function less effectively in school than children who are acknowledged for working diligently and this is ironic given that adults praising for intelligence are just trying to be encouraging.

While the following list is not exhaustive, we hope that it will provide helpful alternatives to overly general praise like "good job," "good girl," "that's so pretty," "you're so smart."

Here are some important alternatives to praise and criticism:

observation/acknowledgment

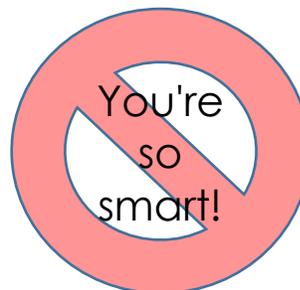
- "Yes" "Well, look at that"
- "I see you," "I see that"
- "Oh, look at what you drew right there"

appreciation

- "thank you for bringing that"
- "that was kind, thank you"
- "thank you for thinking of that"
- "thank you for noticing that"
- "I appreciate your thoughtfulness"

validation and reinforcement

- "yes, that's correct"
- "yes, do it that way again next time too"
- "yes, just like that"
- "it looks like you worked hard on that!"
- "did it take a long time to color in all of that blue?"
- "tell me how you did that part"



And sometimes, no words are necessary at all! In many situations, children are satisfied with a slow nod, a warm smile, or even an "Um Hmmm" so long as the parent is truly paying attention!

Sources that may be of interest:

- Carol Dweck <http://dweck.socialpsychology.org/publications>
- Alfie Kohn <http://www.alfiekohn.org/article/five-reasons-stop-saying-good-job/>

Videos:

- Ashley Merryman – On Parenting <https://youtu.be/nUv9gMN8PFU>
- Trevor Ragan – Praise and Mindsets <https://youtu.be/NWv1VaDeoRY>