

# Clarifying Issues Regarding the Use of Praise With Young Children

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## Abstract

Currently in the popular and academic press, a debate exists as to the usefulness and the potential harm of praising young children. On one side of this debate, there are professionals who are involved in research and education of children with disabilities, and on the other side, those involved in research and education of children without special needs. Because early childhood education has increasingly become inclusive, it is important to understand each side of this debate, and its related issues. This article reviews the literature related to use of praise in education of children with special needs. Clarifications are made regarding the cultural roots of praise and research developments regarding the arguments for and against praise. Finally, recommendations for the best practices for use of praise with all young children are made for parents and early childhood special and general education professionals.

## Keywords

early childhood education, early childhood special education, praise, process praise, self-esteem, achievement, motivation, intelligence, culture, positive reinforcers, applied behavior analysis, positive behavior support

In recent months, the old debate about whether praise is good for children has resurfaced. In the past 3 years, in the online popular press and TV media, questions have been raised regarding the potential damage that praising young children might have; for example, Why could praise be bad for our kids? Why do we praise our children so much? Do we harm our children and make them vulnerable when we praise them? or Do we stifle our children when we praise them? (Apter, 2009; Bronson, 2007; Pleshette Murphy & Allen, 2007; Taylor, 2009; Weissbourd, 2009a). The prominent Harvard psychologist Weissbourd (2009b) warned parents that praising children excessively would damage their children's healthy moral development.

The debate around the issue of praise has involved two groups of scholars and professionals. The first group consists of professionals and scholars who work with children with developmental disabilities, and the second group is usually composed of scholars and practitioners who are against the practice of praise as a strategy to increase a child's self-esteem. Although the first group believes in the efficacy of praise and its usefulness in working with children, the second group is generally against it.

Early childhood special educators are among the first group, who are well familiar with the use of praise as an effective and powerful "social reinforcer" in working with children who have a variety of special needs. Behavior specialists and teachers who employ a positive behavioral support (PBS) framework in working with children with

disabilities often include items such as hugs, high-fives, and verbal praise in their lists of positive reinforcers for individual children. These professionals rely on a body of empirical research that began 40 years ago in the field of early childhood special needs psychology and education, such as Zimmerman and Zimmerman (1962), Becker, Madsen, Arnold, and Thomas (1967), and Madsen, Becker, and Thomas (1968). This research solidly established evidence of the effectiveness for using praise and other positive reinforcements in reducing inappropriate behaviors, increasing appropriate behaviors, and increasing specific cognitive and motor abilities related to academic or functional tasks. Research beginning in late 1970s established additional validation for the use of behavioral techniques, including praise, in prompting learning and promoting appropriate behavior in young children with a variety of special needs, such as the works of Timm, Strain, and Eller (1979), Lovaas (1987), and Strain et al. (1992).

On another side of this debate, there are some scholars and other professionals who question the efficacy of praise as part of professional behavior topography in working

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with young children. They rely on some important research evidence that began to be conducted in the 1990s, such as that presented by Mueller and Dweck (1998). According to this research, praise has potential dangers to children's learning and motivation. In a well-publicized issue of *Young Children*, Kohn (2001) warned early childhood teachers against praising children. In his view, praising children (a) manipulated and exploited them into fulfilling adults' agenda, (b) created "praise junkies" who rely on adults' evaluation and decisions, (c) stole a child's pleasure and pride by telling them how to feel, (d) resulted in children's lack of interest and motivation, and (e) reduced their achievement.

Taking either side of this debate has serious implications for the education of young children, because early childhood classrooms have increasingly become inclusive of children with various types of disabilities. In fact, the issue of using praise and other similar positive reinforcements implicates the quality of services and programs offered to children with special needs in inclusive early childhood classrooms (Strain & Joseph, 2004). In addition, many early childhood preservice and in-service professionals might face the dilemma of whether they are doing their young students a service when they praise them for completing a puzzle, sitting appropriately during circle time, or picking up toys after playtime. They might ask whether they are morally damaging children or stifling their motivation by praising them for appropriate behaviors. Parents might be similarly baffled by being told not to say "good job" to their children, as suggested by Weissbourd (2009a, 2009b), when they are pleased with their children's performance.

This article attempts to clarify misunderstandings about the use of praise with young children with the hope that it would shed some light into the nature of praise and its appropriate use for both parents and early childhood general and special educators. First, the history of use of praise is examined by looking at (a) the origins of praising children in the Anglo-American culture, (b) the link between praise and self-esteem, and (c) the use of praise in education of children with developmental disabilities. Second, the argument is made for the appropriate use of praise, and finally recommendations for use of praise are made for professionals and parents.

### The Roots of Praise: An Anglo-American Cultural Phenomenon

A psychological anthropologist, Quinn (2005), in comparing the models of child rearing across various cultures, discusses culture-specific mechanisms that parents use to teach children highly valued traits in the culture. According

to Quinn, use of exaggerated praise with young children is a unique phenomenon that is used by American middle-class parents to rear children so that they will become culturally valued adults:

What rearers are most likely to call children's attention to explicitly are their good, and even more commonly, their bad behaviors. This is because, as I have noted, parents and other socializers everywhere exploit the child's desire for love and approval in the interests of their own agendas for molding the child into a culturally desirable adult. The most effective way child rearers have to discourage what is culturally defined as bad behavior, and encourage what is culturally defined as good behavior, is to couple their approval or disapproval of the given behaviors with labeling or other markers of that which is approved or disapproved. For . . . example of such labeling closer to home, we need only think of the exaggeratedly happy cry of "Good girl!" or "Good boy!" (see Wierzbicka, 2004) that rings out in middle-class American households, said in a special praise-giving voice and accompanied by an exaggerated expression of delight and often by a little clap, to mark parents' extravagant praise of the toddler's every new accomplishment, such as going to the potty without prompting, or learning to tie their own shoes. In these examples, the emotional arousal of being frightened, beaten or praised is coupled, for good measure, with explicit labeling of the approved or disapproved behavior. (pp. 499–500)

Wierzbicka (2004) further clarifies that theme expressions, such as "good boy" and "good girl," recur in English literature and language since the mid-1800s. According to Wierzbicka, in a cross-cultural perspective, there are no comparable expressions used by parents in other European languages, for example, in French, German, and Polish. Therefore, she explains, praise expressions that are used by Anglo-American parents are not simply idiomatic expressions. Rather, they are expressions of a deeply rooted and religiously inspired Anglo-American cultural tradition that goes back to Puritan times. In fact, she elaborates, the use of praise expressions such as "good girl" and "good boy" by the Anglo-American culture was a movement against Puritan cultural tradition that linked children's naughtiness (being bad boys or bad girls) with hellfire. This American movement, which began in the 19th century, was a way of "positive thinking" that gradually gave way to nurturing "self-esteem" in children and a celebration of children's accomplishments in the 20th century.

## Praising Children to Build Their Self-Esteem

The matter of praising children as a way to boost self-esteem first came to attention with Branden's (1969) book *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*. Branden contended that self-esteem is the most valuable aspect of an individual's self. According to his view, high self-esteem would result in multiple positive outcomes for a person and that many ills of the American society were the result of a lack of self-esteem in its individuals. He believed if one's self-esteem was built and raised, the individual would be able to achieve remarkable feats, such as academic or financial success.

As a result of such arguments, by default, praising became a vehicle to build self-esteem early on in a child. Within the next 40 years after the publication of Branden's book, more than a thousand scholarly articles were published regarding ways to promote self-esteem in children, for example, Wylie (1979), Kugle, Clements, and Powell (1983), and Davies and Brember (1999). Some of these studies promoted approaches such as the use of praise to improve students' motivation, school performance, and academic achievement.

In 2003, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs studied these and other literature related to self-esteem. Their study of more than 1,500 research articles indicated that unlike earlier claims by the self-esteem psychologists, (a) the American society did not suffer from a lack of self-esteem, and if anything, the existing research they analyzed showed Americans had high self-esteem; (b) the society's ills did not stem from a lack of self-esteem and, in fact, research showed that a majority of criminals actually had high self-esteem; and (c) self-esteem was not necessarily linked to high school achievement in children. Baumeister and colleagues' review of research related to self-esteem indicated that efforts like using praise to promote high self-esteem in students were useless and that there was no evidence to show that praise would lead to self-esteem and high academic performance. They discovered that based on the research that they reviewed, praising children was sometimes counterproductive to their school performance.

Earlier, other prominent experts in the field (e.g., Dweck, 1999; Weissbourd, 1996) had warned the public of the trap of "feel-good" practices in education, as they went against cultivating character and healthy moral development of children in the nation. In fact, beginning in the 1990s, a series of studies were published that showed praising children did not necessarily help children achieve academic success. On the contrary, it discouraged children from exploration and learning (for these studies, see Dweck, 1999; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

## How Did we Come to Value the Use of Praise in Education of Young Children?

Praise has been used in education of children with disabilities ever since Itard first used it in working with the "wild boy," Victor, who was found in the outskirts of the forests of Aveyron in Southern France in 1799. When Victor was found, he appeared to be about 12 years old. He was naked and apparently had lived in the forest without any human contact all of his life. Victor had no language, was dirty, and "trotted and grunted like animals" (Humphrey, 1962, p. 6). He was deemed uneducable by all the prominent scientists and physicians of the time, until Itard, a young physician who later came to be known as "the father of special education," proved his colleagues wrong by educating Victor. Itard recorded a detailed account of his experience and the educational methods he used to teach Victor in a diary that was later published in a book titled *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* in 1828. Itard's diary provides one of the first well-documented case studies of a child who might have been diagnosed with autism had he lived in the 21st century (Carrey, 1995; Frith, 1989). In working with Victor, Itard used a variety of positive attention and praise along with food and activities of Victor's liking to motivate him into learning cognitive and daily adaptive tasks (Humphrey, 1962). This method was very effective, as Victor demonstrated impressive feats in both cognitive and daily functional skills. Itard's success prompted a movement in educational science that lead to what we know today as special education.

In today's special education, providing time, positive attention, and praise have been known as "social/positive reinforcers" in behavioral theories (Leaf & McEachin, 1999). In fact, positive attention and praise to a child may be reinforcing regardless of who might be dispensing them. For example, peers' attention to a child may be a strong positive reinforcer to a child. These principles have been increasingly used with children with a variety of severe special needs beginning in 1960s—the time of the popularity of applying Skinnerian behaviorism in psychology and education. Later, these behavioral principles were articulated in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA; Leaf & McEachin, 1999; Schloss & Smith, 1998). More recently, positive social reinforcement is rearticulated as a part of Positive Behavioral Support (PBS), a framework that provides behavioral methods in supporting individuals with disabilities to achieve educational outcomes and have a better quality of life (Ruef, Poston, & Humphrey, 2004). The hallmark of these methods is the use of positive reinforcers in empowering and motivating children with disabilities to learn.

The efficacy of the ABA method, including the use of positive reinforcers, has been well-established through an impressive body of empirical research that began in the

1960s. It is important to note that with some exceptions, most behavioral studies primarily deal with the treatment and education of children with developmental and intellectual disabilities, or those with challenging behaviors (Allen, Hart, Buell, Harris, & Wolf, 1964; O'Leary, Becker, Evans, & Saudargas, 1969). These early studies indicate that the use of praise and positive attention increases the display of appropriate behaviors while decreasing challenging behaviors in children with special needs. Supporting research on the use of positive reinforcers continues to grow (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Hester, Hendrickson, & Gable, 2009; Stormont, Smith, & Lewis, 2007). Lovaas's (1987) well-known study of young children with autism brought to attention the use of ABA as an effective method in education and treatment of children with autism both in promoting academic tasks and in shaping and controlling their inappropriate or obsessive behaviors. To date, his method continues to be used for young children with autism as the most effective empirically validated treatment option that has long-term and lasting effects. Use of praise and positive attention along with other positive reinforcers, such as giving objects, toys, and activities as rewards for desired behaviors, is the most important aspect of Lovaas's ABA approach, especially in working with young children.

### **Rather Than Saying Not to Praise, Say How to Praise**

In a seminal study, Mueller and Dweck (1998) found that praising children for intelligence after success—like saying, “You got a good score! You must be smart!”—has undesirable and negative effects on children's achievement behaviors and beliefs. In their study, children who were praised for intelligence after success chose solving problems in which they knew they would be successful and avoided more difficult tasks. These children focused on their performance status and were less motivated about learning and the learning process. Specifically, these children believed that intelligence was a fixed trait, and when they failed, they ascribed their failing to their low or lack of intelligence and ability. These children were often sorely disappointed if they did not perform well. In other words, this kind of praise created an inflexible mindset in children that their intelligence is a fixed trait (Dweck, 2008a, 2008b).

This study had another very important finding, but unlike the well-publicized first finding, the second finding was ignored by almost all praise critics, such as Kohn (2001). Mueller and Dweck (1998) also found that a specific kind of praise was indeed beneficial. In their study, Mueller and Dweck praised a second group of children for hard work and effort instead of their intelligence. For example, they told this group, “You worked really hard!” This

group of children became motivated to choose problems that increased their own learning. They were interested in receiving strategy-related information about their tasks and were motivated to try harder in general. Children who were praised for effort ascribed their failures in a task to their own low effort rather than to their intelligence. Although the first finding raised concern that giving children easy tasks and praising them for success may undermine their motivation, and make them feel that they are “dumb” (Dweck, 1999; Meyer, 1982), the second finding implied that there is a right way to praise children. This type of praise is likely to motivate children into learning, hard work, exploration, as well as having a healthy outlook about their own capabilities. Dweck and others have repeatedly confirmed these findings during the past 20 years (Dweck, 1999, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2009; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). These researchers clearly and explicitly distinguish between two types of praise, “person praise” and “process praise” (Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Person praise is the type of praise that evaluates a child's attribute, like his intelligence. This kind of praise gives a certain message to the child: “I can look at your performance and judge your underlying intelligence” or “I care first and foremost about your underlying intelligence” (Dweck, 2007, p. 9). Praising for intelligence and attributes creates a fixed mindset in the child, reduces enthusiasm, and discourages motivation (Dweck, 2006, 2008a, 2008b). Process praise, on the other hand, focuses on the child's behavior and actual work. It helps children develop a flexible mindset, encourage them to take on challenges and hard work, and confront their weaknesses and correct them (Dweck, 2006, 2007).

Process praise, the kind of praise that is descriptive and provides positive feedback, has been promoted by several other child experts in the field. For example, Hamre and Pianta (2001) developed an approach of one-on-one interaction with young children, called “Banking Time.” Banking Time is recommended to be used especially for children who might exhibit challenging behaviors. It is a method to promote appropriate behaviors in the child and build a more positive relationship between the child and the teacher through constant positive feedback. This method is recommended to be used for young children and relies heavily on positive comments about and process praise of the child's efforts. For example, the teacher might say, “I see how carefully you are putting all the animals in a row,” or “I can see you are working very hard on that puzzle.” This type of praise is effective and self-motivating to the child. This is also the same type of praise that could help early childhood educators emphasize and invest in relationship building during the one-on-one time they spend with children (Driscoll, 2010; Driscoll, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2007).

## Why Do Children With Disabilities Benefit From Praise?

Working with children with special needs during their early childhood years brings into account two crucial factors for educators: (a) issues related to methods and differentiation of instruction as it relates to these children's specific needs and according to their learning/developmental capabilities and (b) issues related to challenging behaviors of some of these children with special needs.

Working with children with disabilities not only requires an understanding of developmental characteristics of each child but also of issues related to leaning and motivation in these children. The latter is important because motivation is a problem in the majority of children with intellectual and learning disabilities (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009). In fact, the term *learned helplessness*, introduced by Saligman and Maier in 1967, is frequently used to describe learning experiences of many children with intellectual and learning disabilities. Learned helplessness usually occurs when a person has had repeated negative experiences in a situation, so that the person has come to believe that he or she has no control over the outcome of that specific situation.

Many older children with intellectual or learning disabilities who have had unsuccessful and negative learning experiences early on might eventually develop an attitude of learned helplessness. This attitude is marked by a lack of persistence and/or interest in doing tasks that realistically could be mastered (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009). Often an extrinsic motivating factor such as a positive reinforcer is needed to encourage these children to learn (Schloss & Smith, 1998). Extrinsic motivation is of paramount importance during early childhood years for children with special needs. Indeed, as Dweck (1999) and Meyer (1982) indicate, excessive praise on children's attributes might undermine intrinsic motivation in children. Process praise, which is a form of extrinsic motivation, however, is not only beneficial but often necessary in working with children with special needs to help enhance their motivation and prevent development of a sense of learned helplessness (Corpus, Ogle, & Love-Geiger, 2006).

Young children who exhibit challenging behaviors are estimated to form 10% of preschool population (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). In addition to this number, a majority of children with diagnosed disorders, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder, might exhibit a variety of severe challenging behaviors during early childhood years. Early childhood educators are often at a loss as how to deal with the challenging behaviors of these children within the inclusive classrooms. However, use of intervention strategies such as praise and planned ignoring could be extremely effective in preventing challenging behaviors

from occurring and promoting appropriate behaviors in all children in such settings (Hester et al., 2009; Matheson & Shriver, 2005; Sigler & Aamidor, 2005).

Praise and planned ignoring are simple strategies consisting of attending to (and praising) appropriate behaviors while ignoring inappropriate behaviors. For example, when a behavior is positively reinforced, the behavior will occur again, and when a behavior receives a negative consequence, or is ignored, it is reduced. The timing and the amount of time in which positive attention and praise is provided depend on the child's needs for and his or her receptiveness to such social reinforcers. These strategies are often more effective when professionals identify the type of social reinforcer that is effective for a child and pair them with appropriate and positive attention from the child's peers as well. In fact, promoting positive relationships among peers and between adults and children may not only be a strong positive reinforcer but could be used as a part of an effective preventive approach for challenging behaviors, which could be used in all early childhood classrooms.

One framework that uses such an approach is the Teaching Pyramid Model (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003). The Pyramid Model is a framework that was designed to prevent challenging behaviors and promote social emotional development in young children within various early childhood program settings (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010). It is a tiered model, using universal teaching strategies at its most basic level and individualized strategies at the higher tiers to address the needs of the individual child. At the universal level of the Pyramid Model, professionals not only form positive relationships with children themselves but promote positive interactions and relationships among all peers in the classroom. Such relationships are likely to provide the time and positive attention that many children with challenging behaviors need from both adults and their peers, and therefore prevent inappropriate behaviors from occurring while reinforcing appropriate behaviors and promoting social emotional well-being in the child.

## Pitfalls and Recommendations

When done meaninglessly and lavishly, praise loses its effectiveness and often has an opposite effect even on children with special needs. Praising a child should be according to the efforts she puts in. Keep in mind that a child with special needs might exert more efforts in any simple task, like tying his shoes or throwing a ball. A child who is praised senselessly for tasks in which he puts little effort might doubt the sincerity of the person praising him, or worse, might doubt his own sense of worth. Praising children to instill happiness and self-esteem also has its own

pitfalls. In fact, Weissbourd's (2009a) warning to parents is well justified:

Constant praising has become background noise on countless suburban playgrounds. I recently watched a father playing catch with his son, and he complimented every single one of his catches and throws (when his son flat-out dropped the ball, he said "nice try"). . . . Children also tend to know when they have really accomplished something and when they have not, and too much unconditional praise or frequent praise that is connected to tiny achievements can create self-doubts and cynicism about adults, undermining adults as mentors. Children often start to wonder why adults need to constantly prop them up. (pp. 52–53)

In light of what is presented here, it is apparent that not all kinds of praise is necessarily the right kind, nor is it beneficial. However, when done appropriately and deliberately, praise is a valuable tool in motivating children to learn and teaching them appropriate behaviors. Early childhood educators could be self-assured that they do not harm children by praising them when they do it correctly and purposefully. In summing up this argument, the following recommendations for the use of praise with young children are made:

- Always praise by describing the behavior, not the child's person or attributes. Statements like "good boy" or "smart girl" are not only subjective but have very little teaching value. Although this kind of praise might give pleasure to the child, it might undermine motivation and create a fixed mindset (Dweck, 1999, 2009). In addition, a person-focused type of praise does not tell the child what behavior is exactly desired or "good." Instead, use process praise. For example say, "Nice job making that block construction," or "Good work following instructions so carefully."
- Make public acknowledgements of those children who do show good examples of behaviors that you would like children in your classroom community to have. For example, if your goal is for the children to sit quietly during a 10- to 15-minute group activity, acknowledge those who are sitting quietly, "Melissa is sitting so quietly."
- Not all children react positively to praise. Some children who are perfectionists or self-critical of their own work do not appreciate being praised when they do not believe they have accomplished a task to their own satisfaction (Weissbourd, 2009a). Therefore, use your judgment for whom and in what circumstance praise is merited.
- Despite what some early childhood educators, for example Kohn (2001), recommend, never give attention, or engage, young children in conversations or a discussion of behaviors that are aggressive and challenging while or right after the episode has taken place. Discussing a hitting incident with an angry 3-year-old gives unwanted attention to a behavior that needs to be stopped right away (Hester et al., 2009). Instead, stop aggression immediately and say, "No hitting!" Give your attention instead to the child that was under assault. Only give positive attention and acknowledgement to the aggressor when the child displays appropriate behaviors, "I can see how well you are keeping your hands to yourself now."
- Pay positive attention to the appropriate behavior that is valued in your learning community. A simple encouraging description is often more effective than an actual praise. For example, say, "I can see how hard you are at work with that puzzle!" or "Wow! You are sharing the toy truck with your friend." In this kind of encouraging description, you are telling the child that hard work and cooperation is valued in your community and that forming positive relationship with peers is noticed and appreciated.
- Finally, do not be afraid to add judgment value to important statements that represent your moral and cultural values: "It was very nice that you were kind and made friends with X when no one else wanted to play with her." As Quinn (2005) notes, it is the universal tasks of adults in every culture to prime the child for the lessons to follow about the kind of adult he or she is expected to become. This is how cultural and ethical values are conveyed to children. Acknowledging and praising behaviors that are valued by the family and community sets limitations and behavioral framework for children and helps them establish self-discipline and management. It is in this way that children learn to value expected behaviors and consider these behaviors rewarding on their own and by their own merits.

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