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I think all parents recognize that praise is an important part of parenting. Parenting shouldn't be limited to scolding or punishing our children when they are naughty. Parenting is also about building up their confidence by reaffirming them and recognizing them when they have done something good.

This is particularly important for children who lack a healthy sense of confidence and self worth. These children seem extremely tentative in everything they do. They seldom try to accomplish new tasks and take on new challenges and overall they seem paralyzed by the fear of making mistakes or failing. These children often harbor a belief that they are not good enough, that they are not as capable as the other children in their class or in their family. They feel second rate, and each time they make a mistake, or fail in a task, their beliefs are confirmed.

When delivered properly, praise is a powerful tool that can help children feel significant and of worth. It reminds them of all the things they can be, and of all the things that make them unique and special.

The following are some ideas on how parents can praise their children in a healthy way:

1. Let the praise be meaningful

Children can tell the difference between genuine praise and superficial praise. Children know when their parents are genuinely proud of something they've done versus when their parents are praising them for the sake of saying something positive.

I know of some parents who make it a point to praise everything their child does. The danger of doing this is that the praise is cheapened. The child realizes after a while that their parent's praise means very little.

As adults we can relate to this. In our work, there are people who constantly deliver "empty praise" and after awhile we disregard whatever they say, because they flatter, rather than offer constructive comments. Conversely, we have supervisors whose praise we value, because they mean exactly what they say and when they praise or recognize us, it really gifts us a boost of confidence.

The point here is to be genuine and honest. Don't fake it. Praise the child when you have truly noticed something that is worthy of praise. This way, your child will treasure and value your praise.

2. Praise the effort

We need not reserve our praise for success only. After all, life is full of successes that are built on failures. The world can be very result oriented, focused only on the end product. But let's not forget that Thomas Edison reportedly failed over 5,000 times before finally constructing a working light bulb.

As parents, we need to encourage perseverance and the willingness to try new things, but praising our children for trying. The message we should send to them is this; trying is good, putting your effort and your energy into something is good, and at the end of the day, as long as you've given it your best shot, we are very proud of you.

Some parents can be a little too competitive, and may instill the idea that only winning matters in whatever we do.

Pierre de Courbetin, the founder of the modern Olympics remarked that "the most important thing is not to win but to take part; as in life, the most important thing is not to conquer but to fight well."

These are the values that we want to inculcate in our children. Not the fear of failure but the courage to try. Not the obsession with winning, but the desire to do our best and to fulfill our potential.

3. Praise improvements

As parents we should focus on progress rather than perfection. No one is perfect, but we all try to improve on where we are now. The attitude we should inculcate in our children is that we celebrate

improvement and this should spur us on to work harder.

For example, a child may struggle at his maths at school. He may be scoring D's all this while, but because of an increase in effort and work, he scores a C this semester. Now a parent who is overly harsh may still scold the child for not securing an A, however a more supportive parent realizes that the child has improved and is making progress and should recognize the child for it.

Some parents believe that scolding the child will motivate the child to work harder, and this may work sometimes, but it can also send the message that nothing they do will ever be good enough for us. In my experience, praise does not lead to laziness or complacency. In fact, praise inspires and motivates children to work even harder, because they have been rewarded for their efforts in the past.

4. Praise virtue

As parents we should not only focus on our child's performance and abilities. Equal attention should be paid to praising and recognizing our children for displaying virtues and positive values.

For example, when our child is involved in sports; we should not restrict our praise to their performance but also to their sportsmanship and their honesty when playing the game. The message we should send our children is that values are as important as the performance itself.

Generosity, honesty, kindness, consideration, respect, politeness, compassion; these are all key virtues that are praiseworthy.

Conclusion

Praise is about noticing whatever is good, whatever is beautiful and whatever is pure in our children, and drawing attention to it, so that our children themselves see the strength and goodness in themselves. It's not about pretending that our children are perfect and it is certainly not about giving our children the impression that they are perfect.

Rather it is telling them that we see and we recognize all their efforts and all their work and all their struggles to be better. "I see you and appreciate you"; this in itself is a powerful statement of praise. Therefore to praise in a meaningful way, we need to set aside time to observe and to watch and know our children. We can't praise what we don't see.

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