

# Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

Joan E. LeFebvre  
Area Family Living Agent  
University of Wisconsin-Extension  
Vilas, Forest, Florence Counties

---

## Praise That Builds a Child's Self-Esteem

How do you react when someone:

- ▶ says you are a great cook?
- ▶ tells you how smart you are?
- ▶ remarks on your attractiveness?

Do you doubt the person? deny the compliment? feel threatened? or manipulated? Some people react quite negatively to praise, either becoming openly defiant or withdrawing. These are normal reactions to a positive judgement--you don't notice that the comment is *positive*, you notice that it is a *judgement*.

In an effort to enhance their children's self-esteem, parents often use praise to recognize the efforts and accomplishments of their children. Obviously, recognizing our children's positive behavior is more likely to build self-esteem than dwelling on problems. But praise is not always uplifting.

Praise like "you're great...wonderful...marvelous" can be too much for anyone to take. It is hard to accept such extravagant praise. Did you ever notice how uncomfortable you get whenever anyone evaluates you? The minute someone tells you you're "good" or "pretty" or "smart" all you can think about are the times you were bad or felt ugly or did something dumb.

Children also become uncomfortable with praise that evaluates them. They often push it away. Sometimes they will deliberately misbehave to prove you wrong. For example, you tell Jason what a great artist he is and he tells you Jenny is better at drawing. Or you tell Liz she sings beautifully and she is embarrassed about your bragging.

### Descriptive Praise

Instead of **evaluating** what your child has done, it is usually better to **describe** it. Describe in detail exactly what your child did. Then your child, hearing the description, is likely to recognize the truth and credit herself.

The kind of praise a child can "take in" and that truly builds self-esteem comes in two parts. First, *the adult describes what the child has done*. (I see you are all ready to go to the store. You picked up your toys, put on your jacket, and even turned off the light in your bedroom.) Second, *the child, after hearing his accomplishment described, praises himself*. (I know how to plan ahead and be responsible.)

Descriptive praise is harder and takes longer, but the payoff is usually greater. Descriptive praise helps children become independent, creative thinkers and doers. They do not look to somebody else for approval. They trust themselves and their own judgement. They have enough confidence to say to themselves, "I'm satisfied," or "I'm not satisfied," with what I have done. They learn to make corrections or adjustments based upon their own evaluations.

Descriptive praise is unconditional love--not conditional upon your approval.

## Evaluative Praise Creates Dependency

Some praise creates dependency upon the approval of others. The evaluative praise, "You are a very generous person," makes the child dependent on the judgement of the praiser. But the descriptive praise, "When you saw that Elliot forgot his sandwich, you gave him part of yours." gives a child a sense of his own abilities and accomplishments.

Descriptive praise lets a child evaluate himself. If you want the child to focus his attention more on the impact he had on Elliot, you might say something like, "Look at Elliot's face! He looks pretty happy because you gave him something to eat when he didn't have anything." You can help your child see how his actions affect others.

Ask yourself, does my praise make my child more dependent upon me and my approval, or do my words help him to see his strengths and give him a clearer picture of his abilities and his accomplishments? The goal is to put the child in touch with his own powers and enable him to praise himself. The person your child needs to please is himself.

Good Job! Wonderful! Great! Praise, as it is commonly practiced, is a way of using and perpetuating children's dependence on us. It gets them to conform to our wishes. It sustains a dependence on **our** evaluations, **our** decisions about what is good and bad, rather than helping them begin to form their own judgements. It leads children to measure their worth in terms of what will lead us to smile and offer the positive words they crave. It leads to a dependency on approval.

## Components of Descriptive Praise

Effective praise, then, has two parts. First the parent expresses appreciation for some specific contribution or effort. Second, the child draws conclusions about himself or herself based on this specific statement from the parent.

For a mother to tell her son, "You're so strong," is not as effective in building self-esteem as saying, "That was really a heavy load. Thanks for your help." This boy can then think to himself, "I must be pretty strong. Mom thought I was a good helper." These internal

conclusions will be much more credible to the child than a parent's general value judgment of the child as a person.

Evaluative comments are often unnecessary. Parents can be less judgmental and controlling in the long run, more effective at promoting self-determination and intrinsic motivation by simply acknowledging what a child has done. Just pointing out an aspect of a child's drawing that seems interesting (without saying that it's nice or that you liked it) will likely be sufficient to encourage her efforts.

For example, if your preschooler makes you a get well card. Instead of saying, "It's beautiful," you can describe it: "I love these yellow balloons and red hearts. They cheer me up. I feel better already, just looking at them."

## Practice Using Descriptive Praise

It takes more thoughtful effort to use descriptive praise than evaluative praise. Why do we respond with a barrage of compliments? It's easy. It takes skill and care and attention to encourage people in such a way that they remain interested in what they are doing and don't feel controlled. It feels good to have someone looking to us for approval.

Remember descriptive praise has two parts:

- ▶ **Describe what you see and hear.**
- ▶ **Describe what you feel.**

Name three things your child does that you might want to praise.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Describe what the child does. Share your comments with your child.

Sources:

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. *How To Talk So Kids Can Learn*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1995.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon. 1980.

Kohn, Alfie. *Punished by Rewards*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 1993.

Lee, Thomas R.. "Learn the Effective Use of Praise." January 3, 1996. online PenPages, Pennsylvania State University.

Author: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension  
Reviewer: Steve Small, Extension Specialist, Family Life, UW-Madison

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact:  
JOAN E. LEFEBVRE, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, P O Box 369, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu  
October, 1996

Updated August, 1997