Five Reasons to Stop Saying “Good Job!” (***)
Five Reasons to Stop Saying “Good Job!”

By Alfie Kohn

NOTE: An abridged version of this article was published in Parents magazine in May 2000 with the title “Hooked on Praise.” For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here—as well as a comprehensive list of related resources—please see the books Punished by Rewards and Unconditional Parenting.

Hanging out at a playground, visit a school, or show up at a child’s birthday party, you might be on the lookout for hearing repeatedly: “Good job!” Even tiny infants are praised for smacking their hands together (“Good clapping!”). Many of us blurt out these judgments of our children to the point that it has become almost a verbal tic. Telling our kids how much we appreciate them is nice, but it’s worth looking more closely. Rather than bolstering a child’s self-esteem, praise may increase kids’ dependency on us. The more we say, “I like the way you...,” or “Good _ing_,” the more kids come to rely on our evaluations, our decisions about what’s good and bad, rather than learning to form their own judgments. It leads them to measure their worth in terms of what will lead us to smile and dole out more approval.

Let there be no misunderstanding. The point here is not to call into question the importance of supporting and encouraging children, the need to love them and hug them and say nice things to them. It’s why we do it. It’s a way of doing something for other people who may not know anything about themselves, their own behavior.

1. Manipulating children. Suppose you offer a verbal reward to reinforce the behavior of a two-year-old who eats without spilling, or a five-year-old who cleans up her art supplies. Is that what you want him to do? If it is, why not use contingent rewards—something he wants—so that he will have less to do with you? If not, then you have less to do with what and why?

2. Punishments—usually a way of doing something for children to get them to comply with our wishes. It may be effective at producing this result (at least for a while), but it’s very hard to know—and help children to see—that making them feel bad (or look bad) is a way to make them feel good. Children may be affected by what we have done— or failed to do. The latter approach is not only more respectable but more likely to help kids become thoughtful people.

3. Stealing a child’s pleasure. Apart from the issue of dependency, a child deserves to take delight in her accomplishments, to feel pride in what she’s learned how to do. She also deserves to decide when to feel that way. Every time we say, “Good job!”, though, we’re telling a child how to feel.

4. Losing interest. “Good painting!” may get children to keep painting for as long as we keep watching and praising. But, warns Lilian Katz, one of the country’s leading authorities on children’s learning, this is “a reminder to parents to keep the good times going”.

5. Reducing achievement. As if it weren’t bad enough that “Good job!” can undermine independence, pleasure, and interest, it can also interfere with how good a job children actually do. Researchers keep finding that kids who are praised for doing something well are less likely to persist with difficult tasks or share their ideas with other students. In short, “Good job!” doesn’t reassure children; ultimately, it makes them feel less secure. It may even create a vicious circle such that the more we scold them on the praise, the more the kids seem to need it; so we praise them more. Sadly, some of these kids will grow into adults who continue to need someone else to pat them on the head and tell them they’re OK. Children want us to love them, and they want us to want them.

Mary Budd Rowe, a researcher at the University of Florida, discovered that students who were praised lavishly by their teachers were more tentative in their responses, more apt to answer in a questioning tone of voice (“Uh, seven?”). They tended to back off from an idea they had proposed as soon as an adult disagreed with them. And they were less likely to disagree with adults or challenge a point rather than accept it. They were more likely to move from one idea to another, and back again, rather than to think through a thinking process more carefully.

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