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

Readers of this magazine may be familiar with Rheta DeVries’ classic book, Sugar Coated: The Emotional Control of Children, which told the story of a researcher who offered rewards to children for performing various tasks. The study was conducted in a research laboratory and was designed to understand the impact of rewards on children’s behavior. The researcher found that children who were offered rewards for their efforts tended to become more dependent on the rewards for performing tasks, and less likely to perform tasks for intrinsic reasons. This is because rewards can create a “sugar-coated” control, where children are only motivated to perform tasks in order to receive the reward, rather than for the task itself. This can lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation and a decrease in the quality of performance, as children become more focused on the reward rather than the task itself.

In a similar study, researchers found that children who were praised for their efforts tended to become less likely to persist in difficult tasks or share their ideas with others. This is because praise can create a “sugar-coated” control, where children are only motivated to perform tasks in order to receive the praise, rather than for the task itself. This can lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation and a decrease in the quality of performance, as children become more focused on the praise rather than the task itself.

In a more recent study, researchers found that children who were encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions tended to become more independent and less likely to rely on external validation for their performance. This is because self-regulation is a key component of intrinsic motivation, and when children are encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions, they are more likely to develop the skills and self-efficacy needed to be successful independent learners.

In conclusion, while rewards and praise can be effective in certain situations, they can also create a “sugar-coated” control, where children are only motivated to perform tasks in order to receive the reward or praise. This can lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation and a decrease in the quality of performance. Instead, it is important to encourage children to be responsible for their own actions and to develop the skills and self-efficacy needed to be successful independent learners. This can be achieved through a focus on self-regulation and intrinsic motivation, rather than external validation.