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

By Alfie Kohn

"An abridged version of this article was published in Parents magazine in 2000 and 2001 with the title "Hooked on Praise." For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here as well as a comprehensive list of citations to relevant research — please see the book Punished by Rewards and Unconditional Parenting.

Lest there be any 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 be enthusiastic about the great things they do. That is why they were OK. It is why, even in the shadow of battling cancer, our lives could be a little easier if we were "doing to" strategies were just a little more commonplace.

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 after herself. Imagine this: it goes well, but later the same child is unhappy about having to do something else. Rhetta Reeves, a professor of education at the University of Northern Iowa, refers to this as "sugar-coated control." Very much like tangible rewards — or, for that matter, punishments — it’s a way of saying "take it or leave it" to 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 damaging in the long run. It doesn’t make a classroom more creative, or a house cleaner, or fewer people are affected by what we have done — or failed to do. The latter approach is not only less expensive but more likely to help kids become thoughtful people.

The reason praise works in the short run is that young children are hungry for our approval. But we have a responsibility not to exploit that dependence for our own convenience. A "Good job!" to reinforce something that is just a matter of sharing, instead of a consequence of a child’s self-esteem, pride may increase kids’ dependency on us. The more we say "I like the way you do it," or "Good job," 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 some more approval. 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, 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 sate on the praise, the more kids 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 doing something well; else we won’t want them. If we’re praising positive actions as a way of discouraging misbehavior, this is unlikely to be effective for long. Even when it works, we can’t really say the child is now interested in sharing or helping. Those actions came to be seen not as something valuable in their own right but as something they had to do to get that reaction again from us.

2. Creating praise junkies. To be sure, not everyone uses praise as a calculated tactic to control children’s behavior. Sometimes we compliment kids just because we’re genuinely pleased by what they’ve done. Even then, however, it’s worth looking more closely. Rather than bolstering a child’s self-esteem, pride may increase kids’ dependency on us. The more we say "I like the way you do it," or "Good job," 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 some more approval.

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up/

3. Stealing a child’s pleasure. Apart from the issue of dependence, 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 pride. Every time we say, "Good job!," though, we’re telling a child how to feel. To be sure, there are many instances when our evaluations and our acknowledge and our praise are appropriate. The child who especially needs a boost may want "Good job!" But the constant stream of value judgments is neither necessary nor useful for children’s development. Unfortunately, we may not have realized that "Good job!" is just as much an evaluation as "Bad job!" Even valid positive judgments aren’t that it’s positive, but that it’s a judgment. And people, including children, may take the judgment for the praise. Rheta DeVries, a professor of education at the University of Northern Iowa, refers to this as "sugar-coated control." Very much like tangible rewards — or, for that matter, punishments — it’s a way of saying "take it or leave it" to 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 damaging in the long run. It doesn’t make a classroom more creative, or a house cleaner, or fewer people are affected by what we have done — or failed to do. The latter approach is not only less expensive but more likely to help kids become thoughtful people.

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 early childhood education, "once attention is withdrawn, many kids won’t touch the activity again." Indeed, an impressive body of scientific research has shown that the more we reward people for doing something, the more they lose interest in doing something else. What may have drawn the child to the activity in the first place may lose its appeal. If the point isn’t to draw, to read, to create — the point is to get the good, whether it is an ice cream, a sticker, or a "Good job!"

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 well at a creative task tend to stumble at the next task — and they do as well as children who weren’t praised to begin with. Why does this happen? Partly because the praise creates pressure to "keep up the good work" that gets in the way of doing so. Partly because their interest in what they’re doing may have declined. Partly because they become less likely to take risks — an attitude that’s needed for creativity — once they start thinking about how to keep those positive evaluations. More generally, "Good job!" is a refrain of an approach to psychology that reduces all of human life to behaviors that can be seen and measured. Unfortunately, this ignores the thoughts, feelings, and values that lie behind behaviors. For example, a child may share a snack with a friend in a way of attracting praise, or as a way of making the other child has enough to eat. Praise for sharing ignores these different motives. Worse, it actually promotes the less desirable motive by making children more likely to Fish for praise in the future.

Once you start to see praise for what it is — and what it does — these constant little evaluative eruptions from adults start to produce the same effect as fingernails being dragged on a blackboard. You begin to root for a child to give his teacher the chance to test the limits of their own tolerance by turning around to them and saying (in the same saccharine tone of voice, "Good praising!")

Still, it’s not an easy habit to break. It can seem strange, at least at first, to stop praising; it can feel as though you’re being chilly or withholding something. But that, it soon becomes clear, suggests that we praise more because we need to say it — because children need hear it. Whenever that’s true, it’s time to rethink what we’re doing.

What kids do need is unconditional support, love with no strings attached. That’s not just different from praise — it’s the opposite of praise. "Good job!" is conditional. It means we’re offering attention and acknowledgement and approval for jumping through our hoops, for doing things that please us.

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 likely to depend on us. The more we say "I like the way you do it," or "Good job," 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 some more approval. 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 likely to depend on us. The more we say "I like the way you do it," or "Good job," 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 some more approval. 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 likely to depend on us. The more we say "I like the way you do it," or "Good job," 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 some more approval. 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 likely to depend on us. The more we say "I like the way you do it," or "Good job," 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 some more approval.