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 2001 under the title "Hooked on Praise." For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here — as well as a comprehensive list of references to relevant research — please see the books Punished by Rewards and Unconditional Parenting.

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Hang out at a playground, visit a school, or show up at a child’s birthday party and you can count on 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 verbatim tic. Plenty of books and articles advise us against relying on punishment, from spanking to forcible isolation (“time out”). Occasionally someone will even ask us to rethink the practice of bribing children with stickers or food. But you’ll have to look awfully hard to find a discourse about what is euphemistically called positive reinforcement.

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 help them explore different aspects of their own lives. The problem is that we often do this in a way that has the opposite effect.

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 his own toys. Why is it important that he do this? Is it possible that he has to do this in order to be seen as a responsible child? Rhetta Bivens, 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 forcing 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 makes a classroom hyperactive, and it further turns some people who are affected by what we have done — or failed to do. The latter approach is not only more respectfully 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 parallels an example of our lives is tantamount to the children’s dependence. Kids may also come to feel manipulated by this, even if they can’t quite explain why.

2. **Creating praise junkies.** To be sure, not every use of praise is 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, praise may increase kids’ dependence on us. The more we say, “I like the way you...” or “Good ____,” 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.

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 be challenged by their peers. They were 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 cackle on the praise, the more 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 put them on the head and tell them what’s OK and what’s not. And we want for them what they need for us.

3. **Stealing a child’s pleasure.** Apart from the issue of dependence, a child deserves to take delight in his 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. To be sure, there are times when our evaluations are helpful and our directions appropriate. Especially with toddlers and preschoolers. But an almost 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!” It’s at least as much a positive judgment as it is positive, but that it’s a judgment. And people, including us, are affected by what we’ve done before. I occasion the occasions when my daughter was trying something new for the first time to do it before. But I try to resist the knee-jerk tendency to say “Good job!” because I don’t want to dilute her pleasure. I want her to share her pleasure with me, not look to me for a verdict. I want her to excite, “I did it!”

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 researchers in child psychology, you may be losing the child’s interest. “Better to help children become interested in their own work than to force them to continue.” Indeed, a classic study by Katy Tiddian and David Weikart showed that kids who are given a reason — praise — to engage in a task are less likely to persist with difficult tasks or share their ideas with other students.

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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 forcing 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 makes a classroom hyperactive, and it further turns some people who are affected by what we have done — or failed to do. The latter approach is not only more respectfully but more likely to help kids become thoughtful people.

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 are less likely to do it again in the future. But is it because they are less likely to persist with difficult tasks or share their ideas with other students.

This point, you’ll notice, is very different from a criticism that some people offer to the effect that we give kids too much approval, or give it too easily. They recommend that we become more rigorous with our praise and demand that kids “earn” it. But the real problem isn’t that children expect to be praised for everything they do these days. It’s that we’re tempted to take shortcuts, to manipulate kids with rewards instead of explaining and helping them to develop needed skills and good values.

What’s the alternative? That depends on the situation, but whatever we decide to say instead has to be offered in the context of genuine affection and love for who kids are rather than for what they do. When unconditional support is present, “Good job!” isn’t necessary; when it’s absent, “Good job!” won’t help. And that’s the basis of the research we’ve been doing through our headlong immersion in this issue.

This research, incidentally, has some interesting implications for the way we talk about the things kids have done. For example, instead of saying “You’ve got a new tooth!” it’s easier to say “I’m sure you’re going to love your new tooth.” This is a much more accurate reflection of what is going on. When kids are praised for something they have done, then praise may not be necessary.

6. **What kids 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. The former is what verbs like “reinforcing” or “I’m proud” mean; the latter is what “sugar-coated control” or “sugar-coated manipulation” means.

So what do we mean? We mean that it’s the responsibility of parents, teachers, and other adults who care for children to help children become thoughtful people. To do this, they have to be given an artificial reason for being nice (namely, to get a verbal reward). But if that cynicism is unfounded — and a lot of research suggests that it is — then praise may not be necessary.

For example, if a child draws a picture, you might provide feedback — not judgment — about whether what she did was OK. Surely this is not what we want for our daughters and sons.

7. **Tell kids about the things they have done.** Assuming that the child is being truthful, we can simply acknowledge this. And, whenever the child is doing something interesting, we can actively participate. To be sure, not every use of praise is 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, praise may increase kids’ dependence on us. The more we say, “I like the way you...” or “Good ____,” 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.

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