

Using Descriptive Praise to Reinforce Positive Behaviour

Why is praise important?

Studies show that practitioners who regularly praise children develop better relationships with them. Doing so can also build a child's self-esteem and confidence and promote positive behaviour.

However, while common phrases like "good boy/girl" and "well done" may come to mind, using them in isolation is often not effective. Children may not know what they are being praised for. They may also become dependent on this praise for reassurance.

Descriptive praise is when you praise a child by telling them exactly what it is that you like. For example, 'I love the way you put the blocks away when I asked you to'.

Descriptive praise is an excellent motivator and is best for boosting self-esteem and reinforcing positive behaviour – when children get praise for behaving well, they're likely to want to keep behaving well.

When you praise a child, it is also important to focus on praising their effort. Again, be specific by **describing** exactly what it is they are doing well. For example, 'Well done for trying hard to put your shoes on all by yourself'

When giving praise:

- Give praise straight away
- Get down to the child's level and offer eye contact. (But do not insist/wait for the child to reciprocate)
- Use non-verbal behaviour alongside words, such as smiling and giving them a thumbs up.
- Be specific – describe what you like by labelling your praise. Eg "Good job putting the blocks away."
- Give praise for effort, when you can see the child is trying their best. Eg "You tried hard to...", "Well done for persevering ... even when you found it tricky."
- Suggest how the child may feel. Eg: "You should feel proud of yourself."
- Use praise consistently and recognise small steps of progress.
- Praise in front of other people.
- Model self-praise. Eg "I feel proud of myself for working hard to find all the red teddy bears"

Incorporating these steps, instead of simply saying "good job," can make all the difference in how impactful your words are to a young child.

Descriptive praise examples:

- *“Good work sharing your toys with your friends. That was very kind of you.”*
- *“Great work persevering at that tricky puzzle. I can tell you’re getting better at putting puzzles together.”*
- *“Well done for waiting your turn to ride the bike. You were very patient.”*
- *“You were brave to climb to the top of the climbing frame. You should feel proud of yourself.”*
- *“I can see how much effort you put into connecting the train track.”*
- *“Great job building that tall tower. You showed great determination, which is helpful when you’re trying hard things!”*
- *“You were so thoughtful when you helped your friend tidy up.”*
- *“I saw how much effort you put into drawing that picture – what a creative idea!”*
- *“You are not giving up easily, are you? You are very good at trying.”*

How to use descriptive praise to promote positive behaviour.

Descriptive praise is an important tool to help change difficult behaviour and replace it with desirable behaviour.

- **Watch for times when a child behaves the way you want.** When you see the desirable behaviour, or another behaviour you like, respond immediately with praise.
- **Use descriptive praise to redirect from negative behaviour:** Descriptive praise can help redirect children. For example, if a child is running around, you might remind the child of an activity they’ve enjoyed or done well with before. Eg “Remember how you carefully lined up the beads yesterday? I wonder if you can do it just as carefully today.”
- **Encourage good behaviour with praise, rather than pointing out the bad.** This means trying to do more praising than criticising.
- **It takes a lot of praise to outweigh one criticism.** Experts suggest trying to praise children six times for every one time you criticise them.

If you comment on the behaviour you want more of, a child will do it again to get your attention and approval. **What you notice gets repeated!**