



Triple P | Positive Parenting Program



Ask Nicole: The Power of Praise

“Parenting is the easiest thing in the world to have an opinion about, but the hardest thing in the world to do.” – Matt Walsh, blogger

Isn't that the truth! It seems that everywhere I turn – TV, internet, social media and everyday conversations – everyone has an opinion about the “right” way to parent, which implies there is a “wrong” way. I don't know about you, but I find parenting hard enough without worrying about being blamed or shamed for the decisions (and mistakes) I make.

This month we'll talk about the power of praise, a topic that generates many opinions and questions. How much is too much or too little? Will my children become dependent on praise? Will praise do more harm than good? These are important questions, and like much of parenting, the answer is, “It depends.”

It's my hope that this column provides an opportunity for parents and caregivers to ask questions and get answers that help strengthen their relationships with their children. I hope you'll find value in the following practical tips and ideas based on the world-renowned Triple P Positive Parenting Program, available to families in Santa Cruz County. If you have a question, please email me at triplep@first5scc.org.

Dear Nicole,

I have two kids, ages 3 and 7. They're both great kids, and I don't have any parenting problems right now. But during a recent play group, one of the other parents said that praise is bad for kids because they will learn to only feel good about themselves if someone is praising them. I praise my kids and they seem to like it, but should I stop doing this?

- Lena

Dear Lena,

Thanks for asking this question. It sounds like praise works for you and your children, which is a good reason to continue using it. There are many opinions about whether praise helps children become confident, capable and motivated. Some studies say praise increases children's willingness to tackle challenges and continue trying tasks. Other say that praising children's intelligence makes them less likely to take on challenging tasks, especially when they have low self-esteem to begin with. That makes it clear as mud, right?

Not all praise is the same, though. Vague, over-exaggerated or overused praise loses its meaning. But praise – also called encouragement, acknowledgement, or positive feedback – is effective when it's sincere, specific, and descriptive. Think about how it feels when you get positive feedback about a task you worked

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hard on at home or your job. It feels good to be acknowledged and makes you want to do more of the same, right? The same thing applies to kids. Here are some tips for using praise effectively:

Praise your child's efforts and accomplishments.

- "I can see how hard you're studying for that spelling test," or "You were really focused during soccer practice" are examples of acknowledging a child's efforts. This type of praise tells your children they are valued for just being themselves and trying their best, regardless of the end result. This helps increase children's motivation and persistence when learning new or difficult tasks.
- "Great job on your spelling test," or "I'm proud of you for scoring a goal today" are examples of praising accomplishments. This type of praise can be rewarding for children because it tells them you noticed their achievements. Try to praise accomplishments that your children worked hard to achieve, especially as they get older. Praise may sound insincere to them – and lose its meaning – if they feel they're being praised for accomplishments that come easily or are routine.

Describe the specific behavior you want to see more of.

- Descriptive praise is an effective way to encourage positive behaviors and help

children learn new skills. For example, "I'm impressed you cleaned your room all by yourself," or "Thank you for using your calm voice to ask your brother to stop teasing you" are good examples.

Keep the praise focused on positive behaviors.

- Avoid giving praise that sounds like criticism, such as "It's nice to see you following the rules for a change," or "Thank you for not talking back to me like you always do." These statements keep the focus on problem behaviors instead of recognizing a child's positive choices and improvements.

Be genuine and sincere.

- Use words and body language that feel natural to you. Even if you stumble over your words, your children will feel the genuine love and appreciation you are expressing through your praise.

Final Thoughts: The "debate" about whether praise is helpful or not is likely to continue. Everyone is entitled to their opinion and to make their own choices about how to raise their children. However, perhaps instead of debating *whether* to praise children, we should be asking ourselves *how* to use praise effectively to encourage children's confidence, competence, motivation and independence. That's what parenting is all about, right?

Nicole Young is the mother of two children, ages 10 and 14, who also manages Santa Cruz County's Triple P - Positive Parenting Program, the world's leading positive parenting program. Scientifically proven, Triple P is made available locally by First 5 Santa Cruz County, the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency (Mental Health Services Act) and the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department.