

Director's Link

FEATURE:

Rethinking Our Reliance on Praise

THE DIRECTOR'S TOOLBOX:

Praise Versus Encouragement

BEST PRACTICE INTO PRACTICE:

Cracking the Curriculum Conundrum

Rethinking Our Reliance on Praise

Carol Weisheit



As an administrator, you most likely spend time observing teachers and providing feedback on their performance. Do you praise them or do you provide them with encouragement? What is the difference? Understanding the difference between praise and encouragement can help you find ways to support peak performance.

Encouragement fosters autonomy, positive self-esteem, a willingness to explore, and an acceptance of self and others. Praise relies on someone else to tell you how well you've done. Alfie Kohn writes about the negative outcomes of utilizing praise with children in his book *Punished by Rewards*. Daniel Pink, in his bestselling book *Drive*, discusses the impact of praise on adults. Both authors

identify negative outcomes of praise as diminishing motivation, discouraging risk taking, decreasing problem solving, and increasing dependency on others. What becomes evident is that by using praise we contribute to motivation being **extrinsic**—tied to “something” whether it's words, candy, money, approval, or privilege. When we switch to encouragement, motivation becomes **intrinsic**—tied to one's own abilities, interests, and moral compass.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRAISE STATEMENTS AND ENCOURAGEMENT STATEMENTS

What are the specific differences between praise statements and encouraging ones? First, encouragement statements are **specific and focus on actions**. Praise statements are generic and can be doled out indiscriminately with little regard for what the individual actually accomplished.

Second, encouragement statements focus on the **process, not the product**. A focus on the effort and progress that individuals make helps both adults and children internalize their actions. For children, this process of internalization leads to understanding how their actions affect others rather than on the actual accomplishment.

Third, encouragement statements **avoid comparison and competition**. Individuals are valued for their contribution (creating an opportunity for win/win) rather than

pitted against someone else (creating a problem of winners/losers).

When we praise a person's behavior, it's important to stop and think about what we are trying to accomplish. Are we trying to “get them to do *what* we want?” or “get them to do something the *way* we want?” If so, we miss opportunities for them to think critically, engage in self-reflection, and understand how their actions impact others. When we say, “Good job!” what are we really saying? When we say, “If you clean up your area, you will get a sticker,” we are manipulating a child's behavior rather than tapping into the natural inclination of internal motivation that children so desperately need to develop.

In the same way, when we engage in praising teachers' behavior, we are also missing out on opportunities for self-reflection and understanding how their actions impact the center, you, or others. As we think about what we want for our children and teachers, do we want them to be rote learners, being blindly obedient? Or do we want them to be deep thinkers, problem solvers, and creative thinkers? I'm confident we want the latter.

STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE SELF-REFLECTION

As we think about how this impacts our children and staff, here are three strategies you can utilize.

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Being present is critical in helping children and teachers know that we understand them. When we are busy on the phone, on the computer, putting up bulletin board, or doing paperwork in their presence, we send the message that what they are saying or doing is not important. We have all seen children’s behavior that tries to get our attention when we aren’t fully engaged.

■ **Get on their level:** If children are sitting on the floor, then sit on the floor next to them. If children are sitting in chairs, then kneeling next to them or sitting in a chair next to them sends the message that you are physically present. If a teacher is standing, then stand up as well. If a teacher sits in your office, get out from behind your desk and sit as well.

■ **Use their names:** What better way to show a child you are paying attention than to use their name! Some names are harder to pronounce than others so it may take some practicing until you get it right. Avoid cute nicknames like “honey,” “sweetie,” or “buddy” and opt to use the child’s given name. Always check with parents to see about which name is preferred. For staff, always use their name when talking with them. If a teacher has a difficult name to pronounce, practice, practice, practice!

Using open-ended questions encourages children and teachers to think critically about a situation and gives you an understanding about how they view a situation. When we only ask children close-ended questions, we are primarily asking them to learn by rote. “What color is that?” has only one answer. But, if we use a different approach, we will garner much more information. For instance, “I’m wondering about all the colors you are using” opens up an opportunity for the child to tell you about all the colors he knows and provides you with much more information about his cognitive skills.

■ **Use wh- questions:** Ask what, where, and when questions to help children and adults describe their actions. “What would you like to tell me about your

building?” “Where did you get the idea to add string to your picture?” or “When do you think you might be finished with the ball?” For staff, when you are brought a problem, use open-ended questions to start the dialogue: “What might help us as we look at this issue?”

■ **Avoid why questions:** “Why” is a very abstract term and taps into a level of thinking that is not yet developed in children 3–5 years old. The other difficulty with “why” is that we often use it in an accusatory way. How often have you heard a teacher or parent say to a child, “Why did you hit Johnny?” The response we hear most often is, “I don’t know.” And, it’s true! A young child does not know why because they are not yet using their rational mind. Even with adults, most of us are put on the defensive when we are asked a “why” question, especially when it’s used in an accusatory manner.

Providing feedback through verbal dialogue is very important for all children and is especially critical for children with disabilities. Asking children to all sit the same way (“criss-cross applesauce”) does not allow individuality in how children may be comfortable. But, to say, “Find a way that you are comfortable to hear the story” helps children regulate themselves and it helps us to provide feedback if a child is sitting in another child’s space. “Sarah, it looks like Demetri can’t see the book if you sit there. Where else could you put your body so that you can see and Demetri can see?” Time consuming? Yes. Worthwhile? Absolutely! And, for children with cognitive impairments we may need to provide the movement for them—that is, say to Sarah, “Let’s move your body here so that Demetri can see, too.” This helps Sarah internalize your words by your movements even though she can’t respond verbally.

■ **Use “out loud” commentary:** This is especially helpful for children with cognitive impairments so they can hear your words and pair it with an action. If a child spills something at snack, you might say, “Let’s go get a paper towel and we can clean the spill together.” For teachers, it might sound like, “I’m going to take all

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The Director’s Link is made possible by funding from the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, and is distributed free of charge to early childhood directors in Illinois.

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 The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University is dedicated to building the leadership capacity of the early childhood workforce. The activities of the Center encompass four areas: professional development, evaluation, research, and public awareness.

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The Director's Toolbox

Empty Praise Versus Encouragement

Many teachers believe that giving children lots of praise is an instructional strategy that motivates them to become engaged and eager learners. Many directors believe that doling out abundant praise to their teachers motivates peak performance. But there is a big difference between empty praise and meaningful encouragement.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TERM, *EMPTY PRAISE*?

With children it sounds like any of the following:

- What a beautiful picture, David!
- Nice job tying your shoes, Dominique!
- Good job sharing, Sharice!
- I like the way Tyrone is sitting with his legs crossed.

With adults, it might sound like:

- Great job cleaning the kitchen, Amanda!
- Wow, super art display, Mindy!
- Nice work on the parent meeting, Aaron.
- Your room collected the most cans for the food drive. Well done, Mary!

BUT WHAT IF WE CHANGED THOSE STATEMENTS ABOVE TO BE MORE ENCOURAGING?

They might sound like:

- David, I noticed you used lots of red and black on your painting.
- Dominique, I remember when you first came to the center and tying your shoes was really difficult! Now it looks easy for you to do.
- Sharice, I saw Daniel smile when you shared the play dough with him. That was very kind.
- It looks like many children are ready to hear the story by sitting quietly.

THE ENCOURAGING ADULT STATEMENTS MIGHT SOUND LIKE:

- Amanda, I really appreciate your cleaning the kitchen so thoroughly after last night's parent event.
- Mindy, parents will really appreciate seeing children's art work displayed on the wall at the level where the children can enjoy it too.
- Aaron, several parents mentioned how much they enjoyed meeting in small groups at last night's meeting.
- It's so nice the center collected so many cans for the food drive, Mary. This really helped the food pantry.

Remember: Encouragement is specific, addresses the process not the product, and avoids comparisons or competition.

Putting Best Practice into Practice

Cracking the Curriculum Conundrum

Lisa Stoler



I remember when Sheri Dushane from the Child Care Council walked in with the *Program Administration Scale*. Our teaching staff had been struggling with writing goals for children and things were feeling stale. She suggested I take a look at Item 11: Assessment in Support of Learning. “That might help you,” she said. “It’s a great tool.” Sure, no problem, I thought to myself.

I started to look through the book and became scared. I’ve been at this a long time, over 15 years. Why was I getting such low

scores? Was I not as great as I thought? I put the book away. I mean, very far away.

A few weeks later, with a visit from Sheri looming and teachers coming in for goal writing help, I took the book back out. One thing at a time, I thought to myself and started with Item 11: Assessment in Support of Learning.

I generously rated us *Minimal* and set our first goal to at least reach *Good*. We needed to use a valid and reliable tool to assess children’s learning and development and then use that tool for curriculum planning. I settled on *Teaching Strategies GOLD® Objectives for Development and Learning*. The layout is easy to understand and the verbiage felt familiar.

After a year using the new developmental checklist we have created procedures to keep us on track. Each child has a binder. In their binder is a list of the objectives with their level checked. We also keep supporting evidence in their binder. These can be as simple as a sample of the child’s scribbling or a note jotted down by the teacher. Teachers use the objectives as goals and their curriculum planning has become far more intentional. They always know what each child is working on.

We love our assessment procedures. We are producing meaningful goals for the children on a regular basis and are incorporating those goals into our daily and weekly plans. I am feeling ready to tackle the next challenge: balancing NAEYC accreditation standards, specifically the criterion in the curriculum standard, with *Teaching Strategies GOLD® Objectives for Development and Learning*, The Common Core, AND the New York State Early Learning Guidelines. That’s our current curriculum conundrum.

M

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LINK TO THE
PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION SCALE
(PAS)

ITEM
11

Assessment in Support of
Learning

The program improvement steps described in this article reflect best practices as measured by the Program Administration Scale (PAS)

Professional Development Opportunities

For Illinois QRIS applicants
GETTING READY FOR THE PAS WEBINARS

Attendance at both 2-hour sessions is required to receive credit.

April 22 and 24, 2013
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March 28, 2013
June 19, 2013

For more information, contact Carmen Adamczyk at carmen.adamczyk@nl.edu or 847.947.5133.

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of your suggestions and at the next staff meeting we will have a discussion with the whole staff.”

- **Give specific feedback:** “Everyone has found a spot to hear the story today.” “Your face looks really excited about the picture you drew!” “Your voice sounds really angry with Teshon, let’s calm down first and then we will talk to him.” With adults, you can simply state what you see in a staff member’s actions without passing judgment. “Sarah, it was a really rough week in your room with your assistant and your sub getting sick.”

These techniques send the message to children and teachers that they are learners whose feelings and emotions need to be considered, not manipulated. When we use praise statements we take away an individual’s opportunity to regulate their own behavior, develop critical thinking skills, and engage in true dialogue with each other. Making this change can be difficult but with time and practice we can provide the necessary environment for people to learn and grow. **M**

References

Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. New York: Penguin Books.

Our cover story was written by Carol Weisheit. Carol is an adjunct faculty for Heartland Community College and an Early Childhood Resource Specialist for Illinois STARnet, a project funded by the Illinois State Board of Education.

Professional Development Opportunities

BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION SCALE FOR FAMILY CHILD CARE

The *Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care* (BAS) measures the quality of professional and business practices in family child care programs. The McCormick Center offers five levels of BAS training ranging from a brief two-hour overview to a three-day intensive reliability training for assessors seeking certification. All trainings can be customized to meet the needs of your local or state quality improvement initiative. Training is also available in Spanish. A complete listing of BAS trainings is available on our website: McCormickCenter.nl.edu.

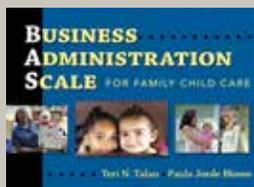
BAS RELIABILITY TRAINING

March 6 – 8, 2013

September 17 – 19, 2013

Location: McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership
National Louis University, Wheeling, IL

For more information, or to schedule a training in your area, contact Robyn Kelton at 847.947.5057 or robyn.kelton@nl.edu.



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Session I: March 23, 2013, 8:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership
National Louis University, Wheeling, IL

Session II: May 18, 2013, 8:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.
Leadership Connections Conference
Westin Hotel, Wheeling, IL

For more information, contact Safiyah Jackson at 847.947.5056 or sjackson27@nl.edu.

Leadership Connections

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