

Reflective Listening vs. Praise

We are all trying to "do it right." And what is more important than building a child's self-esteem? As parents and as caregivers it is one of our daily jobs - and yet it's well worth our time to think about the most effective ways to build a child's character and self worth.

We all know that talking negatively and demeaning a child produces stress and feelings of failure in that child. The old discipline technique of criticizing and showing disapproval to strengthen character has fallen out of favor. So, it seems logical that praising a child and telling him/her how good he is or what a great job she is doing would make a child feel proud and successful.

But there are problems with praise. Although praise can motivate and bring positive results, it is important to realize that praise is a judgment. "Because children value the opinions of adults so highly, frequent evaluative comments, even when positive, can foster undue dependence on the external judgment of others, causing them to devalue their own perceptions about their competence and capabilities. Used indiscriminately, praise loses its potency and becomes empty and meaningless."¹

More effective than praise is a method known as reflective or "active" listening. This communication style is honest and non-manipulative. It is based on a belief that children can be trusted and that they want to learn what it takes to find their niche in the world. The method is that the adult reflects back to children what they are **doing**, and what the adult perceives they are **feeling**. By describing what you notice about the child's efforts and the progress he is making toward his goal, you communicate your interest and support of the child more power- fully than any kind of praise could do. A child begins to build a reliable set of competencies within himself and is not constantly dependent on other's opinions. By simply tuning-in and reflecting with your child on his/her activities, you encourage growth and self-worth. Give it a try!

¹ "Not in Praise of Praise" by Kathleen Grey; Child Care Information Exchange; 7/95.
Copies of entire article are available from your center director.