

In praise of praise

Nicole Madigan | July 26, 2014

Nicole Madigan explains why she believes praise is an important part of growing up and asks, if your parents can't plump your feathers then who can?



(<https://www.kidspot.com.au/parenting/parenthood/parenting-style/in-praise-of-praise/news-story/f9c31a833f2f4b6ef7de12af4d60395a>)

As a young child I received constant praise from my parents.

It didn't matter what I did, as long as I tried my best, I was showered with praise and encouraged to keep going.

As I grew older, of course, their focus shifted to the areas of my strengths, however the same concept applied – providing I'd given something my all, I'd receive an abundance of positive reinforcement.

I firmly believe my parents' attitudes to my abilities, average though they were, directly contributed to my confidence and determination as a teenager and indeed my achievements in adulthood.

Essentially, the praise related to effort and, to this day, I rest easy knowing I've done my best regardless of the outcome and my confidence remains intact despite any setbacks.

The praise backlash

Recently though there's been a backlash against offering children too much praise. Those against it say unwarranted praise gives children unrealistic expectations (<http://www.kidspot.com.au/praise-like-expensive-medicine-careful-administer/>), leaving them unable to deal with their failings in adulthood.

When it comes to little children, I disagree.

While older children no doubt need to be given realistic praise as well as constructive criticism, young children are forming their characters and personalities, and don't rationalise the same way adults do.

There's plenty of time for reality checks I say, and there will be plenty of people willing to provide them as kids get older.

But when parents offer children praise regardless of the quality of their work or where they came in the race, I feel it gives them the confidence to keep on going and, most importantly, enjoy the process of trying and experimenting.

I've often wondered though whether those in the anti-praise camp have confused giving too much praise with the wrong type of praise.

How to praise

Praising "the wrong way" may indeed be open to criticism, according to child psychologist Nicole Pierotti (www.babysmiles.com.au) (<http://www.babysmiles.com.au/>) who says praise is crucial for a child's development and self-esteem, the key is how you do it.

"You want to focus on encouraging and praising the effort," says Nicole.

"Also, keep your praise specific so your child knows exactly what they did to earn it.

"So instead of saying 'Great picture' try, 'I like how you use the different colours'"

"Definitely not comparing to other children – and certainly never to siblings [as] this creates competition! [This is] one of my golden rules for parenting, in fact."

The praise backlash is intrinsically linked to the negativity directed at participation awards, a concept which, contrary to the current trend, I support.

Feather plumping

My five-year-old son recently ran his first school race. Taking after his mum, he placed 34th – smack bang in the middle.

While he was aware he didn't win the race, he was absolutely rapt with his certificate and beamed when I gushed about what a fantastic job he had done.

So, maybe next time a race is on, he'll look forward to taking part – because the experience was fun, rather than an exercise in exclusion.

Again, as kids get older the situation changes and they need to cope with identifying their skills and lack thereof, but a five-year-old is ill-equipped to understand the harshness of society's focus on ranking people. And there's really no need for them to be – there's plenty of time for that.

In contrast, when I was a child, there were no participation ribbons. Not being sporty, I never received a ribbon and made an early association between sports and feeling like a loser.

This feeling remained and as I got older, I continued to avoid sports, or refused to try, in order to avoid embarrassment.

Perhaps if as a little child I'd focused on the fun of the event instead of winning, that concept would have become ingrained into my psyche instead, even when reality eventually hit and winning and losing was the focus.

At the end of the day though my own experience tells me that parental praise is paramount in developing self-esteem and confidence.

The praise I received as a child, and the continued positive reinforcement even to this day, is directly responsible, I believe, for how I view myself and what I've been able to achieve.

Because if your parents don't think you're fabulous, who else will?

Do you believe praise is an important part of childhood?

Read more on Kidspot:

- 5 minute fix: Why praise is bad for kids (<http://parenting.kidspot.com.au/5-minute-fix-why-praise-is-bad-for-kids/#.UtdhkrQvlf0>)
- 5 things we should say to our kids as often as possible (<http://parenting.kidspot.com.au/5-things-every-parent-should-say-to-their-child-as-often-as-possible/#.Utdhm7Qvlf0>)
- How too much praise can be demotivating (<http://blogs.kidspot.com.au/villagevoices/praise-can-be-demotivating/>)

More related reading:

- The effects of praise (<http://www.parentingscience.com/effects-of-praise.html>) from Parenting Science
- Praise and encouragement (http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/praise_and_encouragement.html) from Raising Children Network
- The right way to praise kids (<http://www.webmd.com/parenting/guide/the-right-way-to-praise-your-kids>) from WebMD

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