

Praise

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

On Jack's first visit to his new day care center, the director asked if he knew his name. "Jack," said the 18-month-old. "And do you know your last name, Jack?" Jack thought for a moment, then replied, "Jack Don't."

His innocent response won a laugh from the day care director, but his mother felt a pang of guilt. Earlier, she warned the director that Jack "gets into everything. We're constantly having to reprimand him." Now she worried they had been too heavy with the reprimands.

What Jack most likely needs is at least as much praise for his good behavior as scolding he receives for the bad. In fact, some professionals recommend ten times the praise as reprimands.

Praise is often the missing link in home discipline routines. Many parents limit discipline to scolding and punishment, and think good behavior doesn't need to be praised. But good discipline is really guidance – informing your child what to do and motivating your child to do it. This requires praise and recognition of accomplishments at least as much as setting limits and enforcing them. Unfortunately, some parents are more likely to respond to misbehavior than to encourage good behavior.

Children learn what they are like – who they are – from other people. To grow up to be self-confident and believe they are valuable, lovable, and appreciated, they need to know their parents feel that way about them.

There are other good reasons for balancing praise and punishment. If the only time a child hears from mom or dad is when they are upset, the child may think he or she is a bad person. This is "squeaky-wheel" parenting. Children may also think that misbehaving is the only way to get their parents' attention.

Praising is simple. Catch your child being good and praise him or her every day.

Be specific. Save, "good boy" or "good girl" for the dog. Tell your child specifically what he or she did that pleased, impressed, or excited you. "Thank you for waiting so quietly while I was on the phone."

Praise immediately. Stop whatever you are doing and praise good behavior or an important accomplishment. If you wait, the praise will not be as effective.

Praise a specific task, such as brushing teeth, every time at first, but less often later when it becomes frequent or part of the child's routine. This strategy promotes the desired behavior better than praising every time.

And don't limit your praise to words alone. Enthusiasm, having fun together, a proud smile, hug, or high-five also say to your child that you have noticed and you are pleased.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.