

Unexpected praise is much more satisfying than praise students tend to expect.

“Good Job!” Not Enough!

by Larry M. Albertson

Most of us in our academic preparation have received instructions regarding the importance of providing students with positive verbal responses. Most specifically, most of us believe in the importance of praise and have made efforts to provide needed praise to our students. One common form of praise used in schools is the verbal “good job!” Are we doing a “good job” of praising with our “good job!” response?

Probably not, according to much of the contemporary literature on the effective use of praise. In fact, this information indicates that the casual use of the phrase “good job!” may actually be a very “poor job” of delivering effective praise. Further, there is a potential for inappropriate praise to have negative effects on learning and teacher/student rapport.

The potential use of praise to influence the behavior of individuals has recently received considerable attention in popular literature. Books, such as *The One-Minute Manager* and its many follow-ups and look-alikes have strongly advocated the use of praise through such strategies as “one-minute praisings.” Books critical of these approaches, such as *The 59 Second Employee*, raise concerns regarding the effectiveness and ethicalness of such praisings.

While we have no concrete rules for the use of praise in education, we do have sufficient research to provide guidelines for utilizing praise effectively. The purpose of this article is to present practical guidelines based on the current literature in education. A detailed review of the literature regarding the use of praise in teaching has been done by Brophy.¹

Educational research clearly indicates that praise has the potential to be an effective pedagogical tool for the teacher. However, like all instructional strategies, its effectiveness depends on its specific application. The use of effective praise requires intelligent decisions regarding the student, the behavior to be praised, the instructional environment, and the desired outcomes. The careless use of praise may not only render it ineffective but may result in negative responses from certain students and destroy teacher credibility.

A useful guideline for giving PRAISE in educational settings utilizes praise as an acronym:

Precise
Responses
Aimed at
Intrinsically
Satisfying
Efforts

Larry M. Albertson is chair and associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

In other words, appropriate use of praise requires the teacher to give **Precise** praise **Responses** that are sincere and specifically **Aimed** at student behaviors that are **Intrinsically Satisfying** because of student **Efforts** at a particular task or activity. Utilization of this guideline requires that the teacher understand it and then make appropriate decisions about providing praise. The remainder of this article clarifies the guideline. It is up to individual teachers to utilize their pedagogical experience and skill in the rational application of “**Precise Responses Aimed at Intrinsically Satisfying Efforts**.”

To internalize and utilize this guideline for effective praise requires an understanding of it that includes the individual components of the statement. The danger of dissecting the guideline is that, like many entities, the composite is much more than the sum of the parts. However, an understanding of the parts is a prerequisite to understanding the full significance of the whole.

Precise

Praise is more effective when it is specific. General praise, such as our “Good job!” example, provides too much opportunity for misinterpretation of the behavior or the details of the behavior at which the praise is directed. Precise praise that clarifies the specifics of the accomplishment also reinforces learning by providing detailed, positive feedback about performance. Praise should, therefore, be precise, clarifying the specific aspects of the behavior being commended.

Responses

Praise should be a response to a positive behavior of a student that has been observed by the teacher. The praise should be contingent on the desired behavior and be delivered as a precise response, leaving no doubt as to the behavior being praised. Given as a response, praise should be spontaneous, have a tone of enthusiasm or excitement, and be accompanied by appropriate nonverbal signals that reinforce credibility. Effective praise then consists of precise, spontaneous responses that tell a student you noticed something he or she did, it was good, and you are genuinely happy about it. As a result, the student should also feel good about it.

Aimed At

Praise as a precise response implies that it is directed at specific behaviors. Its aim is to recognize successes or praiseworthy efforts, real accomplishments by students. In examining praise for reinforcement, an analysis of the type of behaviors praise is usually directed toward can be enlightening.

Research shows that teachers are generally more likely to praise good answers or work than to criticize poor work, but are more likely to criticize poor conduct rather than praise good conduct. Effective praise requires strategic decisions about the behaviors at which praise is to be directed.

Intrinsically

Praise is more likely to be effective when the behavior being commended is one which the student feels interested in, committed to, or a need for. Ideally, success in the task will result in enjoyment, satisfaction, and pride. The more intrinsically satisfying the task, the more likely the

¹Brophy, J. (1981). Teacher praise: A functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 51, 5-32.

praise is to be effective. This is especially pertinent when utilizing praise to motivate and reinforce intermediate accomplishments achieved in pursuit of a major goal.

Satisfying

Not only should the behavior at which praise is directed be satisfying to the student, the praise itself should evoke a feeling of satisfaction if it is to be effective as encouragement, reinforcement, or additional feedback. Research indicates that students react differently to praise based on several factors. Low ability students and young students tend to be more influenced by praise, whereas high ability and older students are less influenced by it. Praise is also more likely to produce negative results in high ability and older students. These students tend to associate low ability with students who receive abundant praise. They also tend to feel insulted, even antagonistic, when they feel the praise is insincere or given for something they perceive as ordinary or obviously expected.

Unexpected praise is much more satisfying than praise students tend to expect. Too much praise, general praise, and praise considered insincere tend to be ineffective and generally ignored. There is also a possibility that the overuse of ineffective praise will also affect the potency of appropriately used praise. Students are more likely to find praise satisfying if teachers use a limited number of "prais-

ings" rather than a high quantity of "praisings."

Efforts

Effective praise lets the student know that success is due to personal effort as well as ability. It encourages continued effort with the expectation of continued success. Praise may be used for motivation by recognizing exceptional effort prior to achievement of a goal. Upon achievement of the goal, the praise should continue to associate the accomplishment with the efforts of the student.

Precise Responses Aimed at Intrinsically Satisfying Efforts provides the teacher with a key for the effective use of praise. Praise, like other instructional tools, must be used wisely and requires conscious decisions as to the appropriateness of praise for a particular student in a specific situation. Used inappropriately, praise may not only be ineffective but may damage teacher-student rapport and weaken the effect of appropriately used praise.

Remember, provide individual students with a limited number of **Precise** praise **Responses** that are spontaneous, sincere, and specifically **Aimed** at student accomplishments that are **Intrinsically Satisfying** because of personal **Efforts** by the student. Then, following a few of these appropriate student "praisings," pat yourself on the back, and say "Good Job of providing **Precise Responses Aimed at Intrinsically Satisfying Efforts!**"