

Descriptive Praise

– encouraging confidence, co-operation and connection

It's all about attention

Human babies are born in a very immature state. Their survival depends on getting their parents' attention. But parents often unwittingly give more attention to their child's negative behaviour. It seems curious to a parent that a child would want negative attention but any attention is better than nothing and children often find it easier to get our attention negatively than through positive behaviour.

Consider what happens if your children are sitting at the dinner table and they are sitting with their bottoms on their chairs with all four chair legs on the floor, eating their food with their mouths closed, using their knives and forks and not aggravating their siblings. Mostly parents breathe a sigh of relief and get on with whatever they have to do.

However, if a child starts flicking peas across the room the parent jumps on that behaviour and generally scolds and maybe punishes the child. The child learns that negative behaviour wins attention.

Noticing what our children do right and mentioning it is a much more effective way of giving attention.

Using effective praise is one of the most fundamental skills of positive parenting.

When parents use praise effectively:

- ☺ the child develops a healthy self-esteem - a positive and realistic sense of self-worth;
- ☺ parents see more of the behaviour and values they want to encourage and less inappropriate or undesirable behaviour;
- ☺ a positive relationship is nurtured between parent and child and communication flourishes.

Using praise effectively can produce dramatic and very positive results in children and teenagers. It encourages co-operation and builds confidence and creates relationships of trust and caring between parent and child.

Many parents try to praise their children and often manage to do so, particularly when the parent is calm and relaxed and it is fairly easy to see that the child has done something well.

"Praising children is not merely a bit of luxury, some additional fancy wrapping that we can leave off if we prefer...[it] is at least as important as being properly fed and clothed"

Elizabeth Hartley Brewer, 'Raising and Praising Boys'

However most of us would also acknowledge that we don't praise enough and that we slip into habits of noticing and mentioning the things our children do wrong more often than the things they do right. This is understandable. This negativity bias is also something that has evolved in us to keep us safe.

We are deeply conditioned to notice what's wrong with something.

To illustrate this ask yourself what's the first thing you notice about the sentence:

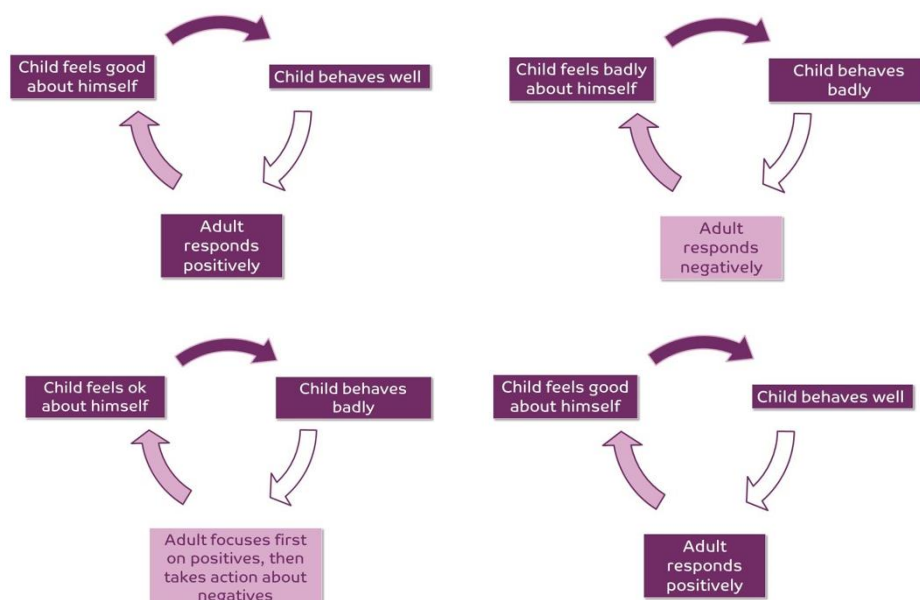
The cat sat on the matt.

Invariably what people pick up on first is the mistake – 'mat' is misspelt. Adults tend to point mistakes out to children in the belief that they will learn from them and correct their behaviour.

But criticism is de-motivating; it makes our children feel bad about themselves and doesn't give them any reason to want to do the right thing. Unfortunately criticism is only one of many different ways we speak to our children which has the effect of putting them down. We also use labelling, blame, sarcasm, shaming and ridicule, shouting and statements which undermine their competence.

We mean well...

When we criticise, we do so with good intention – and often because this is the approach we are familiar with. We are conditioned to think we need to point out what they have done wrong to get them to change their ways. In fact, when we keep telling them what they're doing wrong, they stop listening. We may also be tempted to use harsh words when we feel we are losing control. We might criticise them when we feel embarrassed by their behaviour in public and we want to distance ourselves and show we're taking action. And we are more likely to focus on the negatives when our own self-esteem is low. The diagram below shows the correlation between adult responses (both positive and negative) and the child's behaviour.



Self-esteem

Nathaniel Branden wrote in 'The Psychology of Self-Esteem':

"There is no value judgment more important to man, no factor more decisive in his psychological development and motivation than the estimate he passes on himself...The nature of his self-evaluation has profound effects on a man's thinking processes, emotions, desires, values and goals. It is the single most significant key to his behaviour."

When a child has a healthy self-esteem he is:

MORE likely to:

- ☺ behave well, in appropriate and considerate ways
- ☺ take responsibility for his own actions because he feels basically OK about himself and feels that mainly he gets things right (he is less likely to deny, make excuses, cheat, blame others)
- ☺ try new things, take reasonable risks and to persevere
- ☺ value others; ie. he doesn't need to put others down in order to build himself up
- ☺ form loving relationships
- ☺ stand up for herself and put herself forward when opportunities arise
- ☺ expect (and require) that others will treat her with respect
- ☺ weather life's knocks better
- ☺ accept feedback as constructive suggestions, not be weighed down by criticism

LESS likely to:

- ☺ be dependant on others for approval or to seek out peer approval through inappropriate behaviour
- ☺ seek to make up for feelings of inadequacy by bragging, putting others down, using physical or verbal violence to assert himself or by bullying others
- ☺ demonstrate the sort of learned helplessness that comes from not trusting oneself to do anything alone, not believing in one's own abilities.
- ☺ be vulnerable to (able to say no to):
 - peer pressure (he is able to trust his own judgment)
 - bullying
 - smoking, drinking and drugs and inappropriate sexual relationships (equating sex with love)
 - self-harm, including eating disorders

How is a sense of self created?

Self-esteem is a core belief in one's own value, a realistic estimate of one's strengths and weaknesses. It comes from a child having many experiences which demonstrate that he is a worthwhile and capable person and that his opinion has validity.

Children need to be accepted as unique individuals, appreciated for who they are and not who we'd like them to be or for what they achieve. A positive self-esteem comes primarily from parents' explicit and implicit approval. He learns through his parents' approval that he is important and significant to, and is cherished by, them.

To build strong self-esteem in children parents need to:

- ☺ **AFFIRM, APPROVE and ACKNOWLEDGE** our children through specific and sincere praise
- ☺ **ACCEPT** our children by listening to their feelings, ideas and opinions
- ☺ **ENCOURAGE** self-reliance; helping them to develop skills and feel capable and trusted, including helping them deal constructively with their mistakes
- ☺ **MODEL** confident behaviour, avoiding putting ourselves down and handling failures constructively

It is sometimes argued that a child can develop too much self-esteem and thereby become conceited or arrogant, look down on others, be inconsiderate or intolerant of others, have a sense of entitlement and an inflated idea of their abilities and therefore don't take steps to improve (see below "Can I praise too much?").

This is to misunderstand what makes for a healthy self-esteem and to confuse bravado with real self-confidence. Someone who is parading his abilities is looking for external affirmation of his value so is not really certain of his own worth.

A healthy self-esteem is one where we have a realistic idea of who we are and value ourselves just as we are.

"[Vanity] is where we over-value our strengths and ignore our weaknesses....
with self confidence we recognise our strengths and weaknesses
without feeling ashamed or guilty."

**Dorothy Rowe, psychologist, 'How do you build self confidence'
Psychologies Magazine, June 2006**

When adults caring for children - parents, nannies, grandparents and teachers - praise the children in their care they do so in the hope that this will encourage them to do their best, make them feel confident and to give them the feeling that they are good and capable.

They use words such as "well done, good girl, clever boy, good job, marvellous darling, that's brilliant, you're amazing, you look pretty, I'm so proud of you".

We call this type of praise evaluative praise.

Most adults will have received this kind of praise themselves as children and it is familiar to us so it is not surprising that we should use it with our own children/charges.

Unfortunately evaluative praise, while extremely well intentioned, doesn't seem to achieve what it is intended to achieve; to make them feel good about themselves or to encourage particular behaviour, such as trying something new or doing their best.

Why doesn't evaluative praise work?

The children don't really believe it

Children don't really believe that they are 'super, marvellous, wonderful or brilliant.' Children compare themselves to other children. They can always think of someone who runs faster, climbs higher, draws better or does sums more adeptly than they.

They don't believe the praise and they may doubt the judgment of the person giving it. They may think 'well that's nice of Dad but he's supposed to praise me – it's his job.'

However, it doesn't seem to be much more effective as a form of praise when they hear it from teachers either. They still don't believe it because it doesn't fit with their image of themselves.

Superlative language loses value and credibility – it can be 'over the top'

Once children hear meritless praise they discount sincere praise as well (Source: Judith Brook, professor of psychiatry, New York University).

Research has shown that 'inflated praise' actually damages self-esteem and children find it very pressurising. (Source: Eddie Brummelman, Brad Bushman, Ohio State University 2013).

It isn't specific enough

When we say 'clever girl' it doesn't give the child enough information to repeat the behaviour.

It is evaluative

This makes it more likely that children become dependent on someone else's assessment of their worth, rather than their own evaluation.

It doesn't show real interest

It's too easy to say 'good boy' without really paying attention.

It focuses more on achievement than the effort or particular skill employed by the child

This can make the child feel that approval is dependent on good results, which might, especially for a child who is struggling, feel unattainable.

Studies by Carol Dweck have shown that the 'clever boy' kind of praise is damaging to children and contributes to what she calls a **Fixed Mindset** about their intelligence. A fixed mindset is based on the belief that you only have a fixed amount of intelligence and you can't alter that. If you can't do something it means you're not smart enough.

"Mistakes crack their self-confidence because they attribute errors to a lack of ability, which they feel powerless to change. They avoid challenges because challenges make mistakes more likely and looking smart less so...."

Professor Carol Dweck, psychologist, Stanford University

Children praised for intelligence perform less well on tasks than children who are praised for effort.

"Praising intelligence takes it out of the child's control and provides no recipe for responding to failure."

Professor Carol Dweck

When children are praised for hard work, effort and application they develop a **Growth Mindset** whereby they believe that intelligence can be developed and good results achieved through education and hard work.

Descriptive Praise

The purpose of Descriptive Praise is to motivate our children, to encourage co-operation and to build their self-esteem. Children co-operate more when:

- ☺ there is a positive relationship between parent and child
- ☺ the child feels good about himself
- ☺ the child knows how to get approval

How does Descriptive Praise work?

DP provides our children with the positive attention they need

Children often fall into habits of misbehaviour because it is easier for them to gain our attention through negative behaviour than through positive behaviour. Sadly, giving negative attention tends to be quite easy for most parents.

We can change these patterns of behaviour by making sure our children get sufficient positive attention before they are driven to seek negative attention.

DP helps parents and children see the positives

When parents look for behaviour to DP we begin to see more of the good behaviour, rather than constantly focussing on the things that are wrong. This is a more optimistic, and a more motivating, approach. It makes parents feel more positive.

DP is truthful and accurate

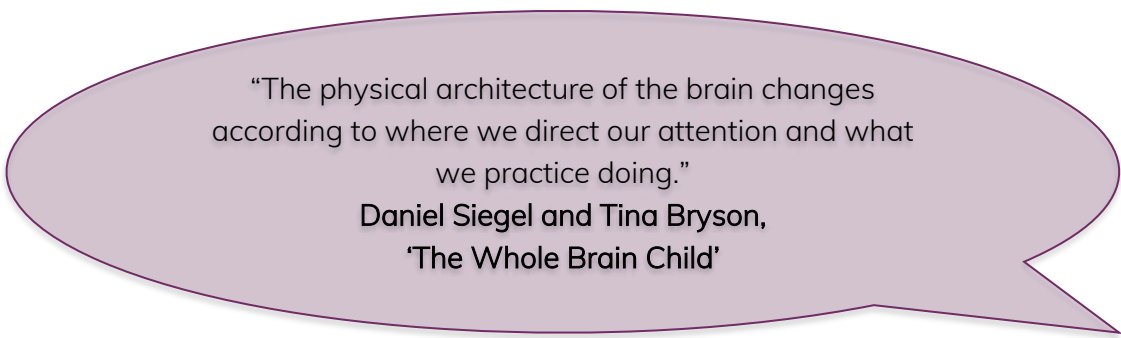
Children (and adults) can't argue with DP because it is simply a description of the facts – there is no evaluation involved.

DP can be used for all children, at any age, in any situation

We can start using DP straight away – we don't need to wait for significant achievements. Children who are struggling to do well, socially, emotionally or academically, need lots of positive attention and support.

DP gives children precise information to repeat the behaviour

Children are on a quest for our approval and attention – even though they can seek this in challenging ways! DP gives them the information they need about the behaviours we want them to repeat.



"The physical architecture of the brain changes according to where we direct our attention and what we practice doing."

Daniel Siegel and Tina Bryson,
'The Whole Brain Child'

The benefits of using Descriptive Praise

When we make the effort to descriptively praise our children the following outcomes can be expected. Sometimes the effect is immediate, sometimes it will take longer.

Our children are:

- ☺ More motivated to please us
- ☺ More connected to us and are more likely to talk to us
- ☺ More likely to listen to us
- ☺ More prepared to look us in the eye if they are not expecting criticism
- ☺ More confident - they are prepared to take risks, to become more adventurous, to volunteer more, be more assertive
- ☺ Trusted by us
- ☺ More resistant to peer pressure, less likely to be bullied, less likely to depend on substances which are substitutes for self-esteem such as drugs and alcohol
- ☺ More willing to look for themselves at how to improve something
- ☺ More likely to develop the qualities we think will help them as adults

We feel:

- ☺ More appreciative of our children as we are noticing more of what they are doing right
- ☺ Better about ourselves when we are more positive
- ☺ More able to encourage behaviour in specific directions, such as when we comment on siblings not arguing or when we notice signs of consideration or self-reliance

The family feels:

- ☺ There is less tension and stress in the family as everyone benefits from increased habits of co-operation, self-reliance and consideration.
- ☺ Children feel less stressed by less nagging and less emphasis on results and in turn perform better.

Common concerns about Descriptive Praise are:

It looks like hard work!

DP is very specific and therefore takes more effort than the 'well done, super, marvellous, brilliant' kind of praise or simply not commenting at all. It also requires us to notice in detail the good things our children are doing and to develop a more positive outlook towards them. There will always be something to praise if you are looking at tiny detail even if there is some negative behaviour as well. The effect of using such specific praise is that our children feel uniquely appreciated as individuals. They see that we care enough to notice what they are doing right. Change always requires effort.

It will take too much time!

It feels like DP takes longer because it doesn't come naturally to us at first. Initially it will take longer until it becomes a familiar way of speaking.

We are conditioned to notice what is wrong in a given situation.

Sadly, nobody ever complains that it takes too long or that it feels unnatural to criticise or nag their children!

Those words roll off our tongues without any effort.

With practice DP feels easy.

How will my child react to Descriptive Praise?

Criticism hinders the natural urge to improve that all humans have. When a child can recognise for himself where improvement is needed this is much more powerful learning than if we point out his mistakes. In fact when we descriptively praise the behaviours that are right, our children are much more motivated to look for and correct the things which are not so good.

When parents use Descriptive Praise there is often an immediate and positive response from young children. They will usually pay more attention to what you are saying and will stop what they are doing to listen. Some children's whole physical demeanour alters as they stand a little taller and straighter, their shoulders square up and they smile. They become more co-operative.

Some children, particularly older or more 'challenging' children, take longer to respond positively and may say they think the praise is patronising or condescending or sarcastic or that they just don't like it. Some will tell parents not to speak to them 'in that voice'. This reaction is transitory and is because the praise doesn't sit well with the image these kids have of themselves. They are more used to being criticised. Teenagers may think it isn't 'cool' and parents may need to adjust their DP to ensure it isn't patronising. Ask your child for help with this. Acknowledge how it feels to them and maybe don't descriptively praise them in front of their mates.

Some kids are hooked on the excitement of seeing you get upset and having the power to wind you up. Being calm and positive isn't as interesting and they can see that you are in charge of the situation, not them. Sometimes kids will also associate a telling off with parental love and if you stay calm and positive it may seem to the child that you don't care anymore.

Keep doing it. Like medicine, Descriptive Praise works even if they don't seem to like it.

If you keep descriptively praising you will discover that any discomfort is temporary. Eventually the young person appreciates being appreciated.

You can descriptively praise older children, and adults, but the language you use will be different to the kind of praise you give a young child and you will need to speak in a quieter, less exclamatory tone of voice.

Some examples are:

- ☺ "I really appreciate you phoning to tell me you will be later than you'd said. Now I won't worry."
- ☺ "You didn't turn the T.V. on until your homework was finished this evening. That is very responsible of you."
- ☺ "Thank you so much for cleaning the kitchen so thoroughly. You washed up the saucepans as well as putting the dishwasher on. It's so nice for me to come in and find there's nothing left for me to do."
- ☺ *"I felt so cherished when you asked me how my day was and offered to make me a cup of tea."*

How to descriptively praise

FOCUS on what they're getting RIGHT, rather than on what's going wrong

Once you start looking for the positives, you'll be amazed how many you can find! It may be hard at first, but it gets easier.

"You hung up your coat, so you've already done one of the three things you need to do when you come home." "Thanks for putting your plate in the dishwasher." "I appreciate the way you let Glen join in your game. I know he's a bit little to understand all its subtleties but he loves doing what his big brother does." "You remembered to bring home your violin today." "I noticed you looked at Miss Norton when she was talking to you then." "You went to get the nappy for the baby when I asked you to – that was co-operative." "You got on your bike again even though you fell off just now – you're persevering." "You're thinking ahead about what you might need to take on the school trip tomorrow." "I'm glad to hear you're willing to voice a different opinion and that you expressed it politely." "You don't just accept what you read in these magazines. You're really thinking about whether it's true or whether you agree with it."

DESCRIBE small steps in the right direction

Don't wait for something significant to happen or you'll miss out on the motivating effect of descriptive praise. "Sophie, you've taken your pyjamas off so you've taken the first step in getting dressed." "You're sitting at the table at the right time and you've got your worksheet out. You look like you're getting ready to start your homework." "You put your pillow on your bed." "You've put all four legs of your chair back on the floor." "You've picked up some of the books that were on the floor." "You've brought your attention back to your work." Using factual language helps our children to take responsibility for their own behaviour and evaluate what they do for themselves, rather than rely on what other people think.

IDENTIFY the quality shown by the behaviour and the positive consequence or intrinsic benefits of the behaviour

For example: maturity, self-control, responsibility, consideration, tolerance, kindness, flexibility, courage, honesty, being supportive, perseverance, loyalty etc.

"You felt shy but you still went and asked the waitress for the menu - that was brave." "You stood up for yourself when Ethan pushed you – you used your words and you said 'I don't want to be pushed'." "You are being a really good friend Sam. You told Tom what the homework was and you even offered to help him with it." "You showed a lot of self-control when you didn't hit your brother for snatching your toy." "You're brushing your teeth without me having to remind you – what great initiative!" "Because you lent Tom your scooter he's willing to let you have a go on his new Play Station game." "You were quick in the bath so we have time for an extra story." "You've been sounding out your words so carefully and practicing really hard so pretty soon you'll be able to read more and more – you can read stories and interesting facts and know what the signs say and you can order from menus by yourself".

ACKNOWLEDGE effort, improvement and strategies

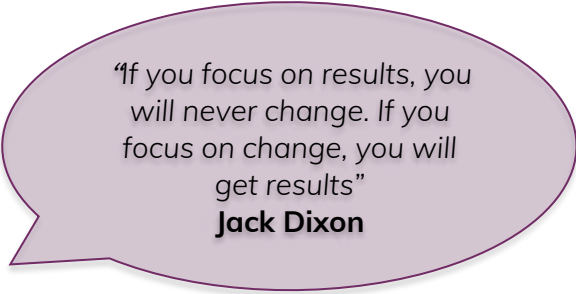
If a child's self-worth is tied up in his achievements it becomes fragile. Praise focussed on results tells a child that our approval is based on their achievements.

"These days your presentation is so much neater. You've remembered to underline the title and put the date on the page."

"I noticed that when the first approach you tried didn't work you tried another tactic. How's it going?" "You kept on trying with these sums even though you didn't find it easy. I call that persevering. Your efforts have paid off – five out of six are correct. I wonder if you can work out how to correct the sixth one."

"You've been sitting still for five minutes Adam. In another five minutes we'll take a stretch."

"I like the way you covered up your spelling word and tried to picture it in your head. That's a good way to learn a word." "You're really slowing down your writing so you can get it neat – look at all these letters on the line!" "You had a smile on your face at the start of hockey practice and you were really putting effort into your running. That shows a great attitude."



"If you focus on results, you will never change. If you focus on change, you will get results"

Jack Dixon

FOCUS on the individual

Make sure your praise is non-comparative. This is important if the child is not to think he is better than others. Being the best (coming first) is not the same as doing your best. Also we want our children to feel uniquely appreciated, not just considered in relation to others.

"That's a great test result. It reflects all the hard work and commitment that you put into your revision." "You ran your hardest in that race. I'm sure that's faster than I've seen you run before." "You've been practicing getting dressed quickly and I'm sure you're much faster than you were at the beginning of term. That must be helpful when you're getting changed for sport." "You were really determined to get a high mark in your chemistry test and you worked out clever strategies for remembering the material."

A few cautions.....

- ☺ Don't use DP just when you want something done – children will work this out quicker than you will realise you're doing it!
- ☺ Don't use DP to control – only to support unconditionally.
- ☺ Don't compare – comparative praise undermines intrinsic motivation and takes away the pleasure of doing something for its own sake, and substitutes doing it because it makes you 'better' than someone else. It encourages children to view others as rivals, rather than collaborators.
- ☺ Don't say "I'm so proud of you." Although it is not the worst thing we can say, it runs the risk of making child dependent on your approval and can be pressurising. Instead, encourage them to be proud of themselves – ask them what they did well, and why it was good.

What about when things aren't going so well?

You can find something small to descriptively praise even when there are things going on that you don't like. You will be in a better position to address poor behaviours once your child is more motivated. Descriptive Praise isn't the only tool you have at your disposal but it is always part of the solution.

We tend to think when our children are not doing what they're supposed to that they're doing it to spite us which makes us feel angry and powerless. Instead it may be helpful to remember that children are of course immature, egocentric and impulsive; they live in the moment and want to do what they want to do. Occasionally they are actually trying to annoy us. There may be many reasons for this including that they are simply in the habit of getting negative attention. Misbehaviour may also be a cry for help, a way of letting us know that something in their life needs to change. (See 'Positive Discipline').

When looking at homework

When looking at a piece of work what may jump out at you is the complete absence of punctuation or the poor spelling or appalling handwriting or the fact that the piece of writing is far too short for a child her age.

Instead of mentioning those things, what you need to draw attention to is where the letters are sitting on the line, which letters are well formed, where capital letters and full stops have been used, the ideas contained in the work, if there is good development of ideas, if the events are chronologically ordered, if she has written more than last time, if there are some descriptive words used, etc.

"You've got eight sentences here and you've got six full stops. That tells me that six of your sentences are ending the way a sentence should end."

Your child is now looking for the other two full stops to put in!

When a child has previously been violent and has sworn

"I can see that you're very angry but you've restrained yourself and you haven't hurt me. You didn't swear at me either even though I can see how very upset you are. You kept it in. That takes a lot of self-control. Would you like a hug?"

When a child has been complaining

"This is the first time I've heard you complain today. Earlier on when you had a problem with your brother you made a request instead of a complaint. You are getting more and more mature."

When they stop, or even pause, from doing something negative

"You stopped arguing, even though you're not happy with what I said." "You're not talking with your mouth full any more." "I'm glad you stopped banging your chair. It's much more peaceful now." They might start up again – in which case, acknowledge that that used to be the way to get attention but now you're looking for the good stuff.

Some more questions about Descriptive Praise:

Can I praise too much? Will my child become conceited?

This is a risk with evaluative praise but if praise is descriptive you cannot praise too much.

We can guard against praise making a child conceited by making it clear that what we are praising him for doesn't make him a better person than someone else. Don't use comparative praise. 'Good at' is not the same as 'better than'.

Appreciating a wide variety of skills, attributes and characteristics will teach your child to similarly value many different strengths and thus learn respect for others.

If you are concerned that your child is becoming arrogant or conceited, take a careful look at the 'surface' bravado to see what lies beneath. Many children show off, and parents need to look behind the behaviour at the real state of the child's self-esteem. A child who is boasting is trying to prove something which a child with healthy self-esteem doesn't need to do. If a child is bragging about his achievements he may not be getting valued enough for who he is.

My child resists praise and gets upset.

Evaluative and inflated praise is not always well received because the receiver needs to feel it is justified and may be pressurising if she feels she needs to maintain the standard set. For example: "You're such a wonderful girl".

If praise relates to a specific act or event there is less pressure on the child to carry on being perfect all the time. No one is perfect and perfection is a treadmill. To tell a child she is good when she may have private thoughts or knowledge of 'wrong-doing' can cause guilt and confusion and a sense of failure of not being able to live up to expectations. Children may stop trying.

Sometimes, sadly, children are even resistant to Descriptive Praise, because they have built up over time a negative self-image that doesn't allow them to believe it. They may be fearful of trusting this new view of themselves. They might like the approval but be afraid that it is only temporary so don't want to get used to it. It is important that the acknowledgments they hear are factual and non-evaluative and that the adults keep going with it. Over time they will see that they can trust in what you're saying and that they can build up a new more positive picture of themselves.

Will he become dependent on praise? How does it prepare him for the real world?

People with low self-esteem are dependent on others to feel good. Using evaluative praise means that the child is dependent on the other person's evaluation of them rather than a more objective standard that he can apply to himself. We want to develop our children's self-esteem by using Descriptive Praise so that they are confident they are valuable people without constant reference to others. Using DP trains our children to see for themselves what's good about them (making an effort, kindness, looking for solutions etc).

In the real world our children will certainly be subject to some criticism. We can help them weather this and accept it as useful feedback by giving them a strong sense of self-worth and resilience. A child with low self-esteem can easily be crushed and defeated by criticism. You cannot inoculate children against criticism by exposing them to it at home.

I see the point, but I feel embarrassed using DP in front of other parents.

Some parents say they find it is embarrassing to descriptively praise their children in front of others. When pressed as to why it is embarrassing, they admit that this is because it is not a societal norm to praise children in this way, particularly when some of their behaviour would not generally be regarded as praiseworthy.

This problem often arises with critical family members. We feel an implied criticism of our parenting. It then takes a lot of strength to say that we found the old methods of criticism weren't working and that we are finding a more positive response using DP.

The more descriptive the praise the more others can see that the child is indeed doing the right thing. If DP becomes enough of a priority we can do it despite feeling embarrassed. It becomes easier to have that kind of resolve when you see the results of using DP. These are your children and you live with the behaviour which results from choosing to criticise or to praise.

Surely there are some things that my son should just be doing and I don't need to praise him for that do I?

When starting to develop new skills, it is useful and easier for the parent to start from the bottom with small everyday good behaviours and build upwards. For your child this might be the first time they feel truly seen and they will respond quickly. As both you and your family become more comfortable with this process you can adjust what you give DP for.

Descriptive Praise will firstly work to encourage a specific behaviour because children want to please their parents, but later on that behaviour will become a habit and over time they will do it just because it is the right thing to do - once they've acquired that value. They need to believe that it is the right thing to do and this doesn't just happen by parents telling them. They need to see the behaviour modelled and for it to be noticed in them. Children internalise values at the end of the learning process and DP is a tool you use as part of the learning process.

For some habits that are already well established (such as turning off a light when walking out of a room or saying please and thank you) your child may find it condescending or unbelievable if you offer DP. It is more effective if you think about the key behaviours that you want to change or improve and find opportunities to notice when your child gets those right through DP and reinforcement of what you want to see.

This question addresses an important point about Descriptive Praise – when do I stop praising?

The answer is most parents stop before the behaviour has really become a habit, in other words, too soon.

Taking the first step

We need to change our habits before our children can change theirs.

When we first start to descriptively praise our children it can sound foreign or false to our ears. How depressing that criticism feels so natural!

If you're describing what you observe it will be sincere. Once you get into the habit of using Descriptive Praise, it doesn't sound peculiar and you begin to make the language your own. You develop fluency in the same way you can when learning a foreign language. Keep experimenting with different expressions until you find your own style. How quickly you get used to it depends, of course, on how much you practice.

We recommend that parents practice descriptively praising each other – this has benefits beyond developing fluency! Some couples have a practice of writing one daily DP for each other in a little book kept for the purpose. This builds trust and a strong united front as well as getting you into the habit of using DP.

Changing habits takes time.....

It would be unrealistic to expect sudden changes. If we recognise that and praise tiny steps in the right direction, more and more little steps will follow. If we expect too much too quickly we will be disappointed and frustrated and lose our tempers with our children.

We need to be patient with ourselves as well. We have been in the habit of giving negative attention to misbehaviour and taking positive behaviour for granted for years. It will probably take a few months before you become an expert at noticing and mentioning the positive. *Studies show that it takes about 1500 practices to establish a new language pattern! (10 times a day, 150 days, ...)*

Getting into the habit of using Descriptive Praise

Parents usually find it hard to descriptively praise when they are tired or emotional which is why it is so important for us to take care of ourselves by looking after our sleep, exercise, nutrition and personal time for ourselves, alone and with our partners, as well as our own self-esteem. Sometimes we need to slow down and prioritise the things that matter to us.

The ideas in this chapter may help you to view criticism and praise in a different way which hopefully will help you to change your own habits.

Old habits die hard so if you find yourself lapsing into criticism and you realise afterwards that you've said the wrong thing, don't beat yourself up, apologise to your children and practice an alternative way of speaking to them.

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Getting into action

What is your strength as a parent?

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What area do you want to improve?

What qualities do you hope your child will develop as an adult?

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Qualities to appreciate in our children

Appreciation	Efficiency	Kindness	Real listener
Assertiveness	Empathy	Learning from	Reasonable
Balanced	Fairness	situations	Responsibility
Being a	Flexibility	Level	Self-control
peacemaker	Focus	headedness	Self-reliance
Carefulness,	Forgiveness	Lovingness	Solution oriented
attention to	Generosity	Loyalty	Standing up to
detail	Gentleness	Maturity	peer pressure
Communication	Good	Modesty	Stoical
Concentration	sportsmanship	Motivation	Thoughtful
Confidence	Gratefulness	Non-judgemental	Tolerant
Co-operation	Hard working	Openness	Willing to praise
Courage	Helpfulness	Organisation	others
Creative	Honesty	Patience	Willing to admit
strategies	Humility	Perseverance	mistakes
Creativity	Inspiring	Politeness	Willing to take
Dedication	Integrity	Positive attitude	risks
Discretion	Keeping	Proactive	Willpower
Doing your best	perspective	Protective	

When children have a healthy self-esteem, what happens?

MORE likely

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LESS likely

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The cat sat on the matt.

What do you notice? What do you want to do? Why?

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What helps you create and maintain a positive atmosphere at home?

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Which of these DPs might you use when you get home? Tick your favourites!

Mornings

- ☺ Even though I know how much you hate being woken up in the mornings you haven't complained. You probably feel very cosy and warm under your duvet but you managed to say Good Morning to me.
- ☺ You've got your socks on. Fantastic. You deserve a hug. What's next, trousers or shirt?
- ☺ You've got your trousers and shirt on already. That's two out of five things done. When you're completely dressed you can tell me if you'd like something cooked for your breakfast.
- ☺ Thank you for getting the juice for yourself. That's self-reliant. I appreciate that you put it back in the fridge as well. Now it will stay cold.
- ☺ I asked you to get your school bag and you did it straight away. That's wonderful co-operation. No shouting from either of us.
- ☺ You made your bed without my having to remind you. No nagging here today! Just a very self-reliant little girl and a very happy Mummy.
- ☺ Even though you don't feel like getting dressed you're not shouting or throwing your clothes around and you're not jumping on the bed.
- ☺ Your brother is watching you do your buttons up. You're setting him a great example. When he's older he'll know how to do it because you will have shown him.
- ☺ When your little sister was struggling with her zip just then you didn't laugh at her. You know she's learning just like you did.
- ☺ This morning it took you 16 minutes to get dressed. That's 4 minutes faster than Monday. You are a person who's learning to manage your time well.

Mealtimes

- ☺ Thank you for staying at the table even though you don't feel like eating. That shows me that you've remembered the rule about staying at the table until Mummy has said you can get down.
- ☺ You've got all four legs of your chair on the floor.
- ☺ You're being very brave and trying something new today. When you're adventurous like that you sometimes discover wonderful new things and even if you don't like what you try I appreciate you trying.
- ☺ Even though you were disappointed we aren't having pizza tonight you didn't complain about the chicken.
- ☺ It's so nice to have dinner with you children when there's no arguing.
- ☺ I can see you're remembering to use your knife and fork and you've cut your food into a bite sized mouthful.
- ☺ I'm going to wait until you've finished your mouthful before I ask you how your day was because I know how hard you've been trying to remember not to speak when there's food in your mouth.
- ☺ Even though I know your sister was annoying you just then I saw that you just moved your chair a little further away and you didn't kick her or elbow her.
- ☺ When I look around the table I can see no-one is throwing food or grabbing things and two children are eating with their mouths closed. I'm really enjoying being here with you.
- ☺ Just then when your brother was telling me about his football game you didn't interrupt although I could see that you had something you wanted to say. That takes a lot of self-control and is very grown-up behaviour.

Homework

- ☺ I see you remembered to bring home your homework diary and your books even though you really don't like doing homework.
- ☺ You're sitting at the table at the right time and I know you've already had your snack and been to the toilet, just as it says in the new rules.
- ☺ You've written your homework clearly in your diary. How sensible - now you know exactly what to do.
- ☺ You're looking at your work. That's the right place to put your attention.
- ☺ You've got 6 of the 7 letters in 'because'. Can you take a guess what the 7th letter is?
- ☺ All these letters are sitting on the line and the tall letters go up to the top line. I like the way you're using these exit strokes on your letters. Soon you'll be ready for joined-up writing.
- ☺ You kept on trying with these sums even though you didn't find it easy. You persevered and your efforts have paid off – five out of six are correct.
- ☺ When you were reading to me just then you used such expression in your voice I could tell which character was speaking without looking at the page, and when you made a mistake you went back to the beginning of the sentence and read it through perfectly.
- ☺ I see you've put the date on your work and you've underlined the title even though I know you think those things aren't worth bothering about. I call that good attention to detail and it's something that teachers appreciate.
- ☺ You're not rushing your work and it looks neater. You lined up your ruler carefully and made sure it didn't slip when you ruled your margin.

Tidying up

- ☺ I really appreciate that you made your bed this morning even though you felt rushed.
- ☺ You've put some of your dirty clothes in the laundry basket. Thank you.
- ☺ You've picked up a lot of the books that were on the floor. I can see carpet now! I'd forgotten it was green!
- ☺ Thank you for stacking the games up without complaining. I know you didn't get them all out.
- ☺ I can see two boys working as a team to clean up the playroom. Jack is sorting out the Lego, Charlie is piling up the cars. What co-operation!
- ☺ Thank you for taking your sheets off your bed when I asked you to without complaining. You remembered it is your job.
- ☺ I'm so glad you're not shouting at me even though I've asked you to put the train set back in its box. I know you'd like to continue playing with it. It takes a lot of self-control to keep inappropriate language inside your head.
- ☺ Thank you for remembering to hang your coat up when you came in even though you were dying to go to the loo. It will stay a lot cleaner on its peg.
- ☺ You put your games things in the wash straightaway. That way they'll be available when you need them next. You're becoming more responsible for your own things.
- ☺ I see you've put some of the toys back on the shelf. This room looks a lot better already, and you've only been tidying up for 5 minutes.

Sibling relationship

- ☺ I'm glad to see you two aren't hitting each other even though you're really angry.
- ☺ Just then you asked your brother to move over in a polite way. You're not doing anything to antagonise him.
- ☺ You didn't laugh at your sister when she was struggling with her reading. You know that she isn't as good at reading as you are yet but you didn't say anything to discourage her. I also like the way you let her answer her own questions even when you know the answers. You don't take away her opportunity for learning.
- ☺ I love being with you two when you're not arguing.
- ☺ Just then your brothers were being a real nuisance and you stayed calm and didn't say anything hurtful. You deserve to be proud of yourself. Keeping calm isn't easy!
- ☺ I can see you were angry when your sister snatched your toy but you didn't hit her. You told her in a strong voice you were playing with it, and you didn't get in trouble.
- ☺ Even though you both wanted to play on the computer at the same time you hardly argued about it. You started thinking of solutions. I appreciate that you were both willing to compromise. That's very mature.
- ☺ You were really angry with Jason and I saw you using a strategy to keep yourself from hurting him. You left the room and slammed the door. That told him you were angry but it didn't hurt him.
- ☺ You shared your ice cream with your brother when he dropped his. You didn't have to do that. It was very generous of you.
- ☺ We've been driving for ten minutes and you haven't said anything horrible to each other. You've each been patiently waiting your turn in the game.