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ON PRAISING YOUR CHILDREN

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How often do you think about the amount of and type of praise you offer your child? The wrong kind of praise, or praise used too frequently or infrequently can cause difficulties. Sometimes we think that it is not possible to over praise a child because constant praise will build a child's self esteem. However, there is a real world for the child outside of the home and a child's peers may not always be as praise giving as his or her parents. Other children are usually quite truthful and blunt about the feats of their peers. A child constantly praised at home may feel himself placed on a pedestal only to be knocked off outside the home.

In a article in "Parents Magazine", educational consultant Fredelle Maynard listed the dos and don'ts of praise. First the don'ts:

- Don't praise by comparison ("You're the best athlete on the team"). It may encourage unnecessary competition or fear of failing next time.
- Don't praise constantly. If everything a child does is terrific, wonderful, the best, you will run out of superlatives and the child will become blasé about applause.
- Don't praise indiscriminately. Children who are veteran competitors know when a performance is good or bad. Parental ecstasies over mediocre performance can either make children cynical or cause them to feel like frauds.
- Don't praise so extravagantly that children feel pressure to go on shining. Over enthusiastic applause destroys a good motive for activity (to please oneself) and substitutes a poor one (to please parents).
- Don't use sarcastic or "backhanded" praise. "Well, you did all flip turns for a change." "You didn't false start. I can't believe it."

The best praise to use is encouragement. Encouragement helps build a child's confidence and autonomy while praise can be more manipulative, emphasizing what the adult wants.

Encouragement allows kid to "own" their accomplishments and to find within themselves the strength and desire to do their best. The following are Maynard's dos:

- Do be specific. Instead of using words that evaluate ("What a great race"), describe in concrete terms what you see: "You kept your technique during that race."
- Do describe the behavior and its consequences. For example, "Thanks for getting dressed and out of the locker room so quickly. Now we have more time to go shopping for the new equipment you need."
- Do focus on the child's effort, not the product. "You practiced hard for this meet and it really paid off."
- Do point out how your child has progressed. "You couldn't have done that last year!"
- Do give control back to the child. Let the child do the evaluating. Rather than say, "I'm so proud of you," say, "You must feel so proud of yourself." Instead of "I like the way you helped that relay," try, "You were able to help that relay."

Adapted from "News for Swim Parents." Published by the American Swimming Coaches Association. Used with permission.

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