

GROWING CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE

Positive Strategies for Helping Kids Win at Life and Sports

Not All Praise is Created Equal

By David Benzel

It's fairly obvious that the parent who constantly criticizes a child's performance will increase the chances of a child becoming cautious and tentative. What's not quite as obvious is that the parent who overly promotes and praises a child can have the same impact. The reason for this is that the child has become painfully aware of being evaluated and judged during every moment of play.

This child will feel relief when his parents can't attend a game because he is free from such heavy scrutiny. When parents send the message that the child's performance is always being evaluated, rather than observed – even if the outcome of that judgment is praise – it's nearly impossible for an athlete to play with reckless abandon.

To play tentatively is the opposite of playing with reckless abandon, or with a free spirit. Tentative play means an athlete is constantly judging "self" – just like the parents are doing – which inhibits playing from one's soul. The best athletes are engaged in a competition without judgment or evaluation of every play or every move until after a game. At that point an objective evaluation by the coach indicates what skills need improvement before the next competition. It's nearly impossible to turn the athletic body loose to play with heart when the head is overly engaged in thinking about "Am I doing good, or am I doing bad?"

Many parents are unaware of an important fact: Not all praise is created equal.

To praise our kids for being talented or gifted creates a belief in children that they can do well based solely on those talents and gifts. That approach does not acknowledge the hard work and effort that must be invested to turn talent into skills. On the other hand, praising kids for working hard on a drill, tedious repetition of a new technique, or self-discipline over adversity reinforces and encourages what it really takes to improve – EFFORT.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves an important question just before we praise our kids: "What's my real motive for delivering this praise?" Here are some possible answers that are not in a child's best interest long-term:

- To create self-esteem artificially by trying to manipulate the narrative around my child
- To extrinsically motivate my child because she is not intrinsically motivated the way I want her to be
- To get others who hear my words to think more highly of my child

Here are some positive and healthy reasons for giving praise to a child:

- To help them see a connection between the effort they have put into practice and the results they're starting to see in performances

- To assist them in believing that their hard work will pay off, even if it is not right now
- To make sure they know that we, as parents, notice and admire their many fine qualities, regardless of how they perform on any given day

The most important point to make with a child is that he or she is loved unconditionally, no matter how they perform. Too much performance-related praise creates the impression that, in our eyes, children “are WHAT they do” and they “are HOW they do.” In this scenario a child’s self-worth is on a continuous roller coaster. In spite of over-the-top praise from mom and dad, a child knows the truth about their own performance. Their self-worth should not be attached to the typical ups and downs of athletic performance, OR manipulated by a parent’s evaluation of something that actually belongs to the child. Rather than meaningless hype and phony praise, a simple “How do you feel about today’s competition?” is a more appropriate conversation starter....and then just listen.

[CLICK HERE](#) to ask David Benzel a question about this topic:

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