

Raising Good Habits: How to Use Praise to Reinforce the Behaviors You Want to See More



Behavioral Foundation: Why Does Praise Work?



Reinforcement

All behavior is either reinforced or it's not. If it's rewarded in some way, it's more likely to happen again.



Everyday Example

If we consistently find what we need at a specific grocery store, we're more likely to return – that predictability reinforces the behavior.



Starts Early!

Not all reinforcers are obvious, but they all play a powerful role in shaping what we do – starting in early childhood!

Why Does Reinforcement Matter Early On?



Critical Window

Early childhood is a critical window for developing behavioral patterns and emotional regulation.



Catch It In the Moment

Research emphasizes the importance of catching "good" behavior in the moment and naming it specifically.



Stronger Connection

Intentional labeled praise strengthens the parent-child connection and teaches your little one exactly what to do.



Caregiver Confidence

Using labeled praise also builds a sense of competence for parents – and that's a good feeling!

How to Use Labeled Praise



What Is It?

Labeled praise clearly identifies what your little one did well – not just "good job," but naming the specific behavior.



Example

"I saw how you shared your Legos with your sister! That was so kind and showed great turn-taking!"



Keep It Immediate

Praise should be immediate and genuine. Notice the behavior as it happens and name it specifically and positively.



Focus on Effort

Focus on effort, strategy, or cooperation – not just outcomes. Use praise consistently but not excessively; it should feel natural!



Ages 3–6 Examples

"Thank you for using gentle hands." "You waited until I finished talking – great listening!" "You tried again even though it was tricky – that shows persistence."

Troubleshooting: Unintentional Reinforcement & Reframing



The Problem

You're on a call. Your toddler interrupts until you hang up. If this pattern repeats, your child's behavior is *unintentionally* reinforced – hanging up becomes their reward.



The Reframe

Instead, notice when your toddler quietly entertains themselves while you talk. After the call, say: *"I really appreciate you letting me be on that call! You were so patient."*



The Outcome

You are reinforcing the desired behavior with labeled praise – increasing the likelihood your child will act similarly next time!



Long-Term Benefits

Labeled praise is linked to improved emotional regulation, fewer behavioral concerns, stronger executive functioning, and increased parent-child connection.



Intrinsic Motivation

At every age, what's noticed and named is more likely to be repeated – especially when it comes from a caregiver they trust.

References

- References: American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Psychological Association (APA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Zero to Three, HealthySteps, Children's Hospital Colorado, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and Boston Children's Hospital.