

Behavior Specific Praise

This week's lesson is one of my absolute favorites. You'll probably hear me say that a lot, so I guess I have a lot of favorites. But, your content this week is so easy to do, and that's why I like it so much, is because it doesn't take a lot of time, a little bit of effort to be mindful of the words coming out of your mouth, but we're not talking many. We're not talking physical setup. We're not talking real in-depth learning here, honestly, just lots of examples to get your brain moving in this direction. This is called behavior-specific praise. I love it with parents, I love it in schools, anywhere. Anyone working with kiddos should be doing this, because just by changing your wording, you can see a huge increase in desired behaviors, easy peasy.

So, behavior-specific praise. What is it? So, when you give your kiddo praise, do they know what for? Can they tell you what they earned the praise for? Do you say, "Good job," and then say, "What do you think you did a good job on?" Can they answer that and get it right? Do they know? If you say, "Nice job on what?" "Okay, cool thanks." "Way to go." "Well, what did I do?" Like, "I don't know. Mom's happy, but I'm not really sure why." So with behavior-specific praise, you just tell them, "Nice job putting your plate in the sink after dinner," whatever simple thing it is that they did. "Way to go sharing with your sibling." Whatever it is, you just tell them what they did. That is not hard, is it?

So by telling them exactly what you're happy to see, you can increase the future frequency of that behavior, and that should sound familiar. That is the definitely of positive reinforcement. We see more of it in the future. We see it more often. We see it more independently, without a lot of prompting and help from you. Praise what you prize. What do you prize? What are you happy to see? What is the good thing that's reinforcing to you, as a mom, to see your kiddos doing these things, by themselves, together, sharing, communication effectively? Praise it. Tell them. Praise what you prize, and tell them what you prize.

So, these are the really complicated, long, technical steps. Watch for those desired behaviors. Be aware. Pay attention. Catch them being good, and then tell them. There you go. There's your behavior-specific praise lesson over. No, we'll get into some more examples, but it really is that simple. Catch them being good. Praise what you prize. Be specific. Tell them what it is that you're happy to see. "Thank you for sharing with your brother." "I love that you finished all your vegetables." Adding in that second piece tells them what the behavior you want to see more often is. "Great job following directions quickly." It didn't take, you know, 20 minutes for them to put their shoes on when you asked them to.

So, practice scenario. Sitting at the dinner table with a toddler. Isn't that always an adventure? And you say, "Good job." Okay, that good job could be for sitting in the chair and not trying to get down. It could be using a fork correctly. It could be drinking from a cup, not throwing food, wiping their own mouth, using an inside voice and not being really loud and screaming, you know, actually eating the food. They might just be doing a good job of putting food in their mouth, eating all of their food. Maybe they clean up a spill. Maybe they are not dropping their food on the floor, or on top of the dog. We have a very fluffy dog, and he gets food all in his hair when there's a high chair involved. Good job for what? That kiddo has no idea. There are so many different things going on in something that seems so simple, sitting at the table. Well, what is it a good job for?

All right, let's do another practice. You take both of your kids to the grocery store, and you say, "Thanks for being such great helpers." Okay, that's a little better. You've got such great helpers, but what does that mean? What behavior am I looking for? How will I know what a great helper is? So do they know what they did that was helpful? It could be staying with you. Maybe you're working with them not wandering off to shop on their own. It might be they're holding onto the list and they can read the list and help you out with that.

Maybe it's just that they're being quiet while you're at the checkout, when you're trying to talk to the checker and pay. They're not, you know, asking for one million things in your ear at the same time. It could be just sitting in the cart nicely. It could be they get to choose some foods and they chose some healthy foods, and weren't begging for cereal that's covered in sugar. It could be that they used kind words to each other. They were using nice voices to each other. Maybe it's not arguing over cereal. Maybe it's not whining and begging for candy. Maybe it's waiting patiently while you visited, you know? You run into someone at the grocery store, and then you try to stop and say hello, and the wheels fall off, and your kids are going bananas. Well, maybe that's what you're working on, and that's what you want to see improved, that they can wait nicely and say hello to the neighbor that you saw at the store. So, "Thanks for being such great helpers ..." by doing what? How are they helpful to you? What did they do that was helpful?

So what's the solution? You just tell them, "Thank you for eating your vegetables with a fork," instead of, "Good job." "I so appreciate you guys helping me out by staying close, not arguing with each other at the grocery store." "Great job talking nicely." "Way to go finishing all your homework on time." Whatever it was that you're happy to see, tell them. Tell them exactly what it is, and that's the behavior that should be increasing in the future.

Be clear and consistent any time we're communicating with our kiddos. So if we're using expectations, specific instructions, "What I need you to do right now," and your praise statements. I think it's easier to remember with expectations and instructions, to not go on and on and on, but with praise, we forget that that needs to be in there too. We need to be clear and consistent, so they know what we're happy to see and what we want to see more of in the future.

Sentence starters are a super easy way to help you out with this. So, if you word things the same way each time, you don't have to think as much. So if you start practice using these

sentence starters, if you just want to print out this list there, it'll be a download for you on this page. Print out your list. Hang it up in the kitchen, wherever. Put it in your purse, for when you're out running errands. And start adding these, "Thank you for ..." "I like how you did something." "Good job doing ..." whatever it is. These sentence starters, they're not done. If you say, "Wow. Way to ..." and you stop right there, you're not making any sense. So, using these sentence starters build in that fill-in-the-blank that you have to put what they did. "You did a wonderful job at ..." "I really appreciate how you did this." "Thumbs up for ..." whatever. "When you did this or that, that was awesome." "You really rock at such-and-such." "I love seeing you do this or that."

Tell them, very specifically, very succinctly. These are sentences. Fill in the blank of a sentence. This is not a paragraph. "Oh, I love seeing you say hello to the neighbor down the street. That is so nice of you. I think she really likes that. She really likes talking to kids. I think she gets lonely living by herself," you know? Going into this whole, long spiel turns that ... It ends up kind of feeling like a lecture for your kiddos, and so getting to the point. What do you want to see more of?

You're praising, but you're also reiterating the expectation. So next time you're at the grocery store, and you want to stop and say hi to the neighbor, "Good job waiting nicely while I said hello to Mrs. Smith from down the street." Next time you go to the store, that expectation has been set that, "You need to wait nicely while I say hello." And then when they do it, you praise them for it. You make a big deal out of it, specifically telling them what's a big deal, what you're so happy about.

So, remember, is it reinforcing? This slide should look familiar. We've looked at it before. The behavior has to happen more often in the future. So if you say, "Thank you for picking up your toys," and the kid never, ever picks their toys up again, then your praise statement was not reinforcing. Perhaps you need to add in something else. "Thank you for picking up your toys. Now you can have some screen time. Now you can go play outside." "Thank you for picking up your toys. You can get a sticker on your sticker chart." Sometimes, you have to add in something else.

Pay attention to what happens later. If you say, "Thank you so much for picking up the toys in the playroom. That was awesome," and then later that afternoon, the same kiddo starts picking up the toys again, that's awesome, and you keep using that behavior-specific praise, "Thank you for picking up again. Two times today? Oh my gosh, you're such a huge helper to me." Be very specific. Pay attention to if that specific behavior increases.

Behavior-specific praise is easy. It's free. It just takes being mindful of your behavior. Are you paying attention to your kiddos? Obviously not 24/7, but paying attention to their behavior. Are you catching them being good, and then are you praising what you prize, telling them specifically, with your praise statements, what you're happy to see?

Another form of reinforcement is called vicarious reinforcement. That's your technical term. It's indirect, so it's when you provide reinforcement to someone else nearby, who is doing a good job. And so, our tendency as people is to repeat, or duplicate, behaviors that

others are being rewarded for. So, what does this mean? Johnny's not following directions. Sally is. So you praise Sally, or give some sort of reinforcement, and then pay attention to that work for Johnny. We think about this in classrooms a lot. You know, you praise all the kiddos, "Thank you, Sally, for sitting nicely. Thank you, Suzie, for coming to the floor. Thank you, Billy, for coming and sitting nicely," and you keep praising each kid until they all eventually join you, because they want that praise with their name also.

So if you combine this with behavior-specific praise, if you have more than one kiddo especially, or if you're hanging out with other kiddos, and you give very behavior-specific praise to the one who is doing what you want to see, the other kiddo is very likely to start engaging in that behavior, to get their behavior-specific praise also.

So how much praise? Do we need to be praising every single little thing? "Thank you for getting your toothbrush out. Awesome job opening up the toothpaste. I'm so happy you put toothpaste on your toothbrush." Hopefully not. I mean, if your kiddo never brushes their teeth, maybe, but no. We want to be praising a lot. We want to catch them being good a lot. We're really trying to increase the positives in our home, overall, but there is a magic ratio, from psychology research, from relationship research. You'll find this in other fields besides just in ABA, in classroom teachers, parenting, marriages. The magic ratio, positive interactions to negative comments. So those positive statements to negative, praise to criticism. I'm not necessarily talking about instructions. Not, "Please go get your shoes on." That's not a negative comment, but when it turns negative, "I told you to get your shoes on. What is wrong with you? Why don't you have your shoes?" Well, that is negative. That is criticism. That's not what we want to see.

So, praise to criticism, how much? Five to one. Five to one. Five praises for every criticism, and if you stop and think about it, if you maybe even take a tally mark for an hour of your day, the hardest hour, morning routine, bedtime routine, evenings, dinner, bath, bed is what it is in my house. It's very quick to try to hit that bedtime magic window. If you stay up too late, good luck to you. Pay attention. Are you praising five to one negative comments, five to one criticism? Pay attention in your marriage, in your work with coworkers, with friends. Are you giving positive interactions five times more often than a criticism?

Increasing your praise across the board, increasing your positive interactions, increasing your positive reinforcement is only going to have good effects. It's only going to help turn things positive in your home. It's going to help your kiddo know exactly what the desired behaviors are, what are those expectations. You're clear and concise with that, but also with your praise, with your, "Thank you for eating a thank-you bite at dinner." "Thank you for getting dressed this morning with only one prompt from Mom." "Thank you for doing your homework without fussing and complaining at me," being very specific. What are you happy to see them doing? And then pay attention. Are they continuing to do that? Did your praise work? Did it help reinforce that behavior, which means it happens again, it happens more often, it happens more independently?

I love behavior-specific praise. It's easy and it works. There's a ton of research behind this, showing how just doing this can increase desired behaviors across the board, and if we're

increasing the good stuff, there's not as much room for the bad stuff. It's replacing those negative behaviors that you want to get rid of.

Here's your takeaway. More praise, more praise, more praise. Increase the good stuff. We all need to hear this, all the time, as parents. More praise, and with that, more behavior-specific praise. Catch them being good, and tell them. Tell them specifically what you're happy to see.