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5 praises a day

Children need to be given the right sort of praise if they are to build those crucial life skills of confidence and positivity, says Dr Nicola Davies

You probably associate the 'five a day' mantra with fruit and vegetables, or perhaps a weekly exercise regime. Now the term is being used to encourage parents to praise their children.

The 'Five Praises' campaign was launched last year by De Montfort University in Leicester after research by Dr Carole Sutton showed that giving children frequent praise encouraged good behaviour and created a sense of security and happiness.

Worldwide research followed and the message was confirmed: children, especially young children and toddlers, need regular praise to foster the feelings of closeness and love that allow them to thrive. It is all too easy to ignore children when they are doing as they are told and playing quietly. But it seems that regular appreciation and praise encourages children to continue doing whatever it was that gained them this positive attention, while also increasing mental wellbeing.

What is the 5 praises campaign?

The aim is to help parents and caregivers pay more attention to the desirable behaviours children show



and to reward these with appropriate praise. As well as as a training resource for parents on how to manage and enjoy their children, it's about laying the foundations for better self-esteem and mental wellbeing in young people.

Why five praises?

Why not three or 10? Although five was chosen by the campaign panel because it goes with the familiar 'five fruits and vegetables a day' slogan, the exact number is not what's important. What matters is that praising children happens frequently and is ongoing.

According to parenting writer Kori Ellis: 'Children need to hear praise and positive comments every single day of the year.' Praising children helps to build self-esteem, which is a significant buffer against the development of chronic emotional problems. It also makes them more resilient.

There's little doubt that the number of negative comments and images that bombard children daily, especially through the media, outstrip the positive ones. A University of Iowa study shows that most two-year-olds

Perfect praising



Give specific praise

Children are more likely to repeat the behaviour if you are specific about what you are praising them for. It helps them understand what parents and caregivers like. For example, saying you are pleased with your daughter for sharing her toys with others will make her feel wonderful, and she will also know adults approve when children share.



Praise for little things

Such as telling them you appreciate it when they say 'please' or 'thank you.' This helps children learn that they don't have to be someone special or do something spectacular. Doing the little things right also counts.



Praise through reward

An effective way to make sure children repeat good behaviour is to reward it. A reward doesn't have to involve expensive gifts, but could simply take the form of a sticker chart.



Spread the praise

Make praise a constant expression in your household. Let children regularly hear adults and older children receive encouraging comments from one another. Besides finding it odd that no one else seems to be doing praiseworthy things, children will begin to doubt its sincerity and meaningfulness if it's only directed at them.



Be concrete

Don't use generic terms like 'Great work!' or 'Super effort.' Instead, use these in conjunction with concrete examples: 'Great work! You must have spent a lot of time thinking about your picture.'

hear about 432 negative messages a day, compared with just 32 positive statements. How can we change this and how can we give praise effectively?

Giving praise effectively

Most parents and adults intuitively recognise the value of praising children, but do so only on occasions when it seems 'right'. However, according to Dr Carol Dweck, a researcher and professor of psychology at Stanford University, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' time to give praise, but there is a wrong way to do it.

'Many parents are simply praising the wrong things,' says Dr Dweck. 'They'll praise a child's intelligence or

Children should be praised every day

Haydn is only 14 months old, but already he reacts to praise with growing confidence, says his mum Claire Gardner.

'I believe that children should be praised every day and that it plays a very important part in their development,' she says. 'We have used praise regularly since Haydn was about four months old and it has had a positive impact on issues like eating habits and manners; taking medicine when he is ill; learning new words and actions and encouraging his interactions with others.'

'Praise has also developed Haydn's confidence, especially in learning to walk. I stand him somewhere he feels safe, walk backwards and hold my arms out. I ask him to come to me and encourage him by telling him he can do it. As he starts to walk towards me, I tell him he's a very clever and good boy and move back slightly, and he then walks further each time.'

Claire adds: 'If Haydn's doing something I'm not happy about, I convey by my facial expression, tone of voice and words that it is negative or wrong. I then leave it and pay no more attention to the negative behaviour and try to turn Haydn's attention to positive activity. This seems to work well in encouraging Haydn not to repeat the behaviour. Just giving him my attention is a form of praise, so giving too much heed to negative behaviour can be counter-productive.'



talents thinking they're bestowing confidence. For example, a parent might say: 'Wow, you're so good at this!' But with this kind of praise, a parent is telling the child about his overall talent or ability which is something we should not be doing.'

'The alternative is praising children for the process they've used. For example, you might praise their efforts or their strategy by saying: "You've tried so many different ways and you found the one that works, that's terrific." With this type of praise, you're essentially appreciating the effort they've put in to make it a success,' Dr Dweck explains.

The overall message is that it's crucial to praise effort, not just performance. By applauding the effort children make towards reaching a goal, you give them the determination to tackle any problem, not just easy ones. Children praised like this are more likely to maintain their confidence levels, continue to enjoy tasks, and progress socially, emotionally, and academically.

"Try to show them you recognise and appreciate something they have done today, however small it might be"

Getting the balance right

'A certain amount of praise for children is positive, but I think many parents tend to over praise their children,' warns Dr Dweck. 'The danger with praising children when they don't really need it is that it sends the message that what they're doing is for you rather than for them. Children will then stop asking themselves if they are enjoying what they are doing and start looking at whether or not they are being praised for it.'

Self-esteem does seem to decrease as children grow older. Most parents hold teachers responsible for this, while teachers think it's the task of parents to encourage positive behaviours and attitudes in their children. The truth is that we all, as a society, have a role to play in providing children with the right balance of praise.

At school, receiving praise makes learners feel successful, and is a great motivating force to carry on trying even when the going gets tough. Individual children often require different styles of praise though. Some like it when the teacher makes an announcement to the whole classroom, while others prefer a quiet word of appreciation.

Just like at home, it's as important and character-building for teachers to praise good behaviour like cleaning the desk or helping a peer, as it is to praise excellent work. Getting praise for effort and not just outcome is fundamental to building self-esteem.

Ask yourself: what has my child done today that I can praise her for? Try to show them you recognise and appreciate something they have done today, however small it might be. It will make you feel good and it will most certainly make them feel good too!

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