

Good job saying “good job?”

We all do it and we all do it without thinking. Good job, good job, good job.

What is our intent behind it? To let the person know you appreciate what he or she is doing. But what if after every time you did or said something, a person responded with, “good job”?

“Susan, I need to ask you a question.”

S: “Good job.”

“Susan, I have a question about my child’s speech.”

S: “Good job talking.”

“Hi Susan, How are you?”

S: “Nice job looking at me.”

The flow of an interaction is immediately cut off and most importantly you are not responding to what the other person is saying or doing. It is so important for a back and forth flow of communication to occur because that is the foundation for both deeper social communication and language development.

Indeed, an impressive body of scientific research has shown that the more we reward people for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Now the point isn’t to draw, to read, to think, to create – the point is to get the goody, whether it’s an ice cream, a sticker, or a “Good job!” In a troubling study conducted by Joan Grusec at the University of Toronto, young children who were frequently praised for displays of generosity tended to be slightly less generous on an everyday basis than other children were. Every time they had heard “Good sharing!” or “I’m so proud of you for helping,” they became a little less interested in sharing or helping. Those actions came to be seen not as something valuable in their own right but as something they had to do to get that reaction again from an adult. Generosity became a means to an end. (Kohn, 1997)

What does research tell us about the use of praise?

Does praise motivate kids? Sure. It motivates kids to get praise. Alas, that’s often at the expense of commitment to whatever they were doing that prompted the praise. (Alfie Kohn)

Telling a child “Good gluing” will not increase the child’s use of glue. Getting things to stick together will motivate the child to glue. Telling a child, “Nice looking at me” does not increase the child looking at you. Responding to the child’s communication in a manner that lets him or her know you are engaged increases the use of eye gaze.

So what can I do instead to let my child know that I am happy about his/her choices, and stimulate language (especially reasoning) without stopping the flow of interaction?

1) Tone of voice will carry the message. Use that proud tone of voice while being specific with your language.

2) Comment about what was great and why it was great: Look at that beautiful picture of the dog. I love his long tail – that is how he smiles! You walked down the hall. That makes sure that you don’t accidentally bump into anyone. Helping me pick up my toys keeps the room clean and the toys safe from being lost or broken. (Notice how reasoning is stimulated!)

3) Careful about praising communication in the form of “good talking” or “good eyes.” Instead, you might comment in the form of feedback after the interaction is finished. For instance, “When you looked at me I knew you had something to tell/show me.” Otherwise, responding to the child’s communication is always the strongest natural reinforcer.