



In Praise of Limiting Praise

When we give love and attention freely, no matter how well our children do, they can rest in the awareness that our love is unconditional.

By Colleen Drobot

We all want to rejoice when our child does something wonderful or achieves a goal. It is a natural part of being a proud parent. We celebrate their endeavors and want to acknowledge them. But when acknowledgment and recognition turn into praise in hopes they will continue to raise the bar, or if we recognize our child *only* when he or she does something well, we could be headed for trouble.

If we give our child attention when they do well, we also need to show them appreciation and affection when they don't succeed. It is so important that we provide comfort and convey how much they mean to us, even if they fail or make mistakes. When we give love and attention freely, no matter how well they do, a child can rest in the awareness that our love is *unconditional*. They don't need to measure up or do something special to earn our love. We offer it without strings attached. When children experience this generous affection, they feel valued for *who they are*, not *what they do*. As philosopher Jean Vanier expresses so beautifully, "*To love someone is to rejoice in their existence*". When our eyes light up when we see our child, when we give them the gift of attention when they least expect it, and when we continue to love them, even when they are not producing or achieving, these are powerful messages that nourish a child deeply and bring them to an emotional and psychological rest.

I always felt my mother got this right. She never seemed to be overly ecstatic when I brought home good reports cards or received honors in piano. She had a way of showing happiness for me but I always knew my success did not determine her well-being. She was just as warm and welcoming when I didn't succeed. She delighted in me whether I achieved or didn't and I never felt I had to win her approval by doing well. The very fact of this made me rest in her presence and I felt accepted. I remember receiving quite a bit of praise from my teachers in the elementary grades. Even though part of me enjoyed it, I also felt uncomfortable, feeling as though I might fall of the pedestal at any moment and expose my imperfection. What if I couldn't always do so well? Would they still like me then? Praise can actually backfire and cause insecurity.

Another problem happens when we over-focus on performance. Often children are full of wonderful emergent energy where they want to play, discover, achieve a personal goal, or create. When we step in and praise a child for their endeavor, we take the focus off the creative process and place it on *our opinions and on us*. Now the child's energy will turn away from the enjoyment of their activity and instead attend to our approval. It doesn't take long for the child to stop focusing on the exploration of their interest or the enjoyment of creating, and now focus on what *we* think of them. When

this happens, the emergent energy whereby the child was learning autonomy, new boundaries, and was acquiring a sense of themselves, is interrupted and the energy turns toward what we think of them or think of their achievements. Now they are pursuing our applause and attention.

I have experienced this even as an adult. My husband and I took up ballroom dancing once. My husband turned out to be a natural and the instructor praised us (*him actually*), using us an example of how to dance. At first we were just having fun, excited about learning the steps, and enjoying our new skills. But after the heaps of praise, I started to focus on the instructor's attention. I felt pressure to 'perform' and when she wandered by, I became very conscious of her judgment and approval rather than on the fun we had been having. Luckily, I could laugh at myself and joke with my husband about it. But for a child, their parent's approval is serious business.

We need to preserve the precious times our children are discovering their world, uninhibited by our stamp of approval. We don't need to reinforce this wonderful emergent energy by commenting on how well they are doing; they will naturally want to venture forth, try new skills, explore their world, seek their passions, and share their gifts. If we have provided for their emotional needs—giving them enough love, enough contact and closeness, satiating their need for belonging and feeling significant—then the brain will come to an emotional and psychological *rest*. When this rest occurs, the child can then radiate forth to create, play, learn, and grow. As parents, we can trust that if we focus on our child's attachment needs, growth will follow.

So when a child wants to show us an accomplishment or creation, we can celebrate it with them, focusing on their enthusiasm of the process rather than the product. We can recognize the originality—that the idea came from within them. We can honor and value their focus, their love for what they do, and share in their excitement, reflecting back to them the joy they feel inside.

We can also become conscious of the effects of too much praise. Whether praise is interrupting our child's creative solitude or whether the praise conveys to the child our love is contingent on their success, we need to be cautious of its power.

Developmental psychologist, Dr. Gordon Neufeld sums up the dangers of praise with a wonderful analogy. He says, "*Praise is like desert. Desert is fine when we have taken in the nourishment of the main course; but we run into problems when it replaces our dinner. Like desert, praise should never be the main course.*" 🌟

"Even though part of me enjoyed receiving praise, I also felt uncomfortable, feeling as though I might fall of the pedestal at any moment and expose my imperfection."

Colleen Drobot is a registered professional counselor, parent consultant and educator with a private practice in West Vancouver. Colleen is a faculty member of the Neufeld Institute and in her parent consultations works from the paradigm developed by Dr. Gordon Neufeld. She can be contacted at cmdrobot@shaw.ca or consult her website at www.drobotcounseling.com. For more information regarding Dr. Neufeld's work, consult www.neufeldinstitute.com.