

Make Praise Meaningful

What do you typically say to students who find the right answer or share with you a well-done product? With adults eager to encourage and support children, “good job” and “nice work” become some of the most commonly-heard phrases in classrooms (and throughout our culture). Over time, however, these generic, evaluative forms of praise actually serve to diminish students’ self-confidence as learners and interest in learning for its own sake. Descriptive feedback is much more meaningful and orients students toward both their learning process and intrinsic interest in learning.

In this Challenge, you will track how often you provide generic praise and try some new language for meaningful - and supportive, encouraging - feedback.

What you will need:

Time estimate: 2 class periods, plus 20 minutes for reflection

Materials: paper, pen, clipboard

Directions:

1. Set up a sheet of paper on the clipboard, for tallying praise to students.
2. Choose a class period or lesson - any subject, any time of the day - in which you will be interacting with many students around their work or play. With your clipboard handy, listen closely - to yourself. Pay attention to your comments and feedback to students, listening for “empty” praise such as “good job” and “nice work.” Listen for other types of praise, too, such as “I like your drawing.” Tally the number of times you issue praise.
3. After the lesson, look at your tally. What do you notice? What surprises you?
4. Then choose a lesson where you will replace those praise statements with meaningful and descriptive feedback. When commenting on students’ learning process or work products or play, try phrases such as:
 - Tell me about your drawing. What do you like best about it?
 - I see you added a lot of dialogue in your story - I know that is something you have been working hard on!
 - Kayla and Martin, you have been working together so cooperatively. How did working in partners help you understand this addition strategy?

You can even give yourself a “cheat sheet” of feedback statements and keep it nearby.

5. Take time to notice students’ reactions to this new type of feedback. Students might be confused at first (especially if they are used to hearing “good job”), and unsure how to respond. Be patient, and keep trying various feedback statements as you discover what feels natural to you.

Resources

To learn more about the damaging effects of “empty” praise and examples of descriptive feedback, read Alfie Kohn’s article [“Five Reasons to Stop Saying ‘Good Job!’”](#)

Read the [American Psychological Association’s article](#) on how to effectively use praise to help students bounce back in the face of difficulties.