



GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell

“You Really Worked Hard on Your Picture!” Guiding with Encouragement

FOR AN ASSIGNMENT IN MY CLASS a few years ago, graduate student Randy Bergstrom wrote a paper on giving encouragement to children. The opening sections of his paper went like this:

Observation—The children start arriving at kindergarten at about 8:30 a.m., and I greet them as they come in. They seem very receptive to my greeting, and I watch them disperse to the different centers in the room. One boy is interested in striking up a conversation with me about a picture he has colored.

Lamar reaches out and hands me his picture.

Randy: Wow! Looks like you used a lot of green.

Lamar: Well, yeah, frogs are green.

Randy: They are green, aren't they?

Lamar: Yeah.

Randy: You used green there for your frog and blue over there and brown over there. (*Lamar smiles.*)

Lamar: Yep. I have a picture on the back too.

Randy: What colors did you use?

Lamar: I used different colors!

Randy: I do see different colors! Yellow and pink and black. (*Lamar looks at me with a smile, gleaming with pride.*)

Lamar: I would like you to have the picture that I colored.

Randy: Thank you! I will put it on my fridge.

Lamar peers up from his picture and smiles in amazement. He looks so pleased that I would put his picture up in my home.

Reflection—I was really nervous that I might give Lamar praise instead of encouraging him to keep on with his good work. I like to praise people, and sometimes I have to be careful not to embarrass them and make them feel uncomfortable.

When teachers begin to use encouragement, they sometimes find it difficult to know just what to say. Especially when children's art is prerepresentational, teachers can find themselves at a loss for words. I found myself feeling this way at first, and I tried to stay away from, “Oh, you are so good at coloring.” I tried to look at Lamar's picture in a different way and to pick out things that were unique about it.

The gesture that let me know Lamar felt comfortable with the way the conversation went was when he gave me his picture to take home. I knew then that he was proud of his work, and he seemed excited to show me other pictures he had colored.



For years, at least since Dreikurs published *Psychology in the Classroom* in 1968, child development theorists have drawn a distinction between encouragement and praise (sometimes called *effective praise* and *ineffective praise*). Some teachers, grown tired of this talk, may ask, “What difference

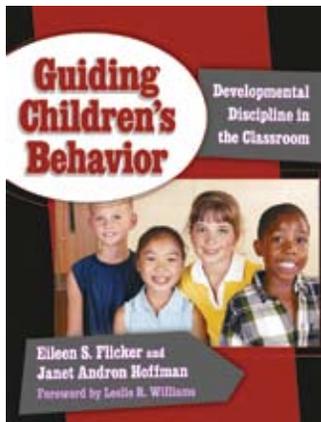
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Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu. Thanks to Randy Bergstrom, whose anecdote first appeared in *What the Kids Said Today: Using Classroom Conversations to Become a Better Teacher* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf, 2000). The anecdote is somewhat modified here. Children's names in all anecdotes are changed.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.



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does it make? Praise and encouragement are both positive.” Well, there is a difference, which we will now discuss—a difference that affects how we guide children in our classrooms.

How do children respond to praise?

What is the worth of a young child’s creation? Short answer: it’s an extension of the child. What we say about the creation, the child hears us saying about her.

Then, isn’t it OK to give praise like, “I like the good job you did”? Well, in my view, no. The “I like” sets the teacher in the power position of judging the child’s work—and also the child (Kostelnik et al. 2006). The child may grow overly concerned about what the teacher’s judgment will be next time.

Further, when a teacher says “Good job,” he does not explain exactly what he values in a child’s creation. The child is left wondering what she did that was “good” this time so that she can repeat it.

A teacher once told each preschooler at a table, “Good job.” Before she could say this to the last child, he complained, “I know, teacher, ‘Good job.’ You say that to all the kids.” Teachers often use praise as a shortcut, a quick, positive phrase that is easy to say, but which some children may not buy. In short, the child comes out of the experience less sure about his creative abilities, more dependent on the teacher to make the call, and perhaps at the same time less trusting in the teacher’s judgment (Leary & MacDonald 2003).

Praise is often public—“I like the way Amber is putting things away.” This praise singles out individual children in order to coax the group into behaviors the teacher wants. While some teachers may like this use of praise because it works, the cost is unrecognized children who feel unworthy of praise and resentful that the teacher has favorites. To steer clear of these negative group dynamics, the teacher must either recognize every child or give acknowledgment to the whole group: “Children, you are working very hard at putting things away.” Use your public encouragement to build group spirit. Speak privately with individuals who could use either extra recognition or reminders.

Encouragement begins with acknowledgment

As Randy reflected in the anecdote, when we move away from praise toward encouragement, it can be hard to know what to say. A teacher put out white, blue, and black paper as well as scissors, chalk, cotton balls, and white glue and then asked the children to make pictures of what they and their family do outside in the snow. She saw wonderfully varied results. A just-four-year-old covered his blue paper completely with white chalk. The teacher acknowledged his work by saying, “You really are using a lot of white chalk on your picture.” He happily explained that his picture was a “bizzard” and his dad was back there shoveling, but “you can’t see him!”

Here is the secret to effective encouragement. Pick out details in the child’s effort, and say something positive about these. The child will then know we truly care. If there is a story, preconceived or spontaneous, the child will be likely to share it. If the task is ongoing, the child will be likely to persevere. (One useful sentence starter is, “You really are . . .”)

Encouragement and guidance

So, what does all this have to do with guidance? Guidance begins by building a relationship with each child—before and beyond conflict interventions. Notice the effect that Randy’s encouragement had on Lamar. The boy didn’t say much (although many kids will), but he smiled more than once, shared the picture on the flip side of the paper, offered the picture as a gift, and was elated when Randy accepted it. Randy even remarked that Lamar “seemed excited to show me other pictures that he had colored.” Isn’t this what education should be about? The positive connection made through encouragement affirms a child’s efforts, validates the child within the context of the group, and begins to build a trusting teacher-child relationship. Children who trust us as teachers in happy times are more likely to trust us when conflicts occur.

Teachers who have really mastered the technique of encouragement use it even when addressing conflicts. Encouragement begins with acknowledgment of actions, words, and feelings. “I can see you are upset. It is OK to be upset. Let’s help you get calm so we can talk about what happened.” Or “You are really angry, but you used words and didn’t hit. I am proud of you.”

Maybe you are saying, “But those quotes use personal ‘I’ references! You said earlier teachers aren’t supposed to use them!” Here is a guideline: Use “I” messages selectively, when you want to reaffirm your relationship with a child (Kostelnik et al. 2006) and in special circumstances when you need to assert your authority (Ginott 1972). Years ago, Ginott outlined a *describe-express-direct* crisis management technique: “There is a goldfish on the floor. I am concerned it will die. Please put cups of water in the fishbowl while I scoop up the fish and put it back.”

The use of “I” statements in this situation increases its emotional intensity. Still, sometimes we have to address situations firmly. Acknowledging to the child (and to ourselves) that we are upset can help us move on to encouragement: “You worked fast, and we saved the fish. Now, let’s talk about what happened.”

To increase your knowledge

These videos provide a clear and capable introduction to the use of acknowledgment to build connections with children.

Educational Productions. 1997. *Connecting with every child: Key to successful discipline*. Video. Unit 2 of the Reframing Discipline video series. Two videos, 25 min. ea. Beaverton, OR: Educational Productions Inc. Online: www.edpro.com.

Devereux Early Childhood Initiative (DECI) and Video Active Productions in partnership with NAEYC, 2007. *Facing the challenge: Working with children who use challenging behaviors*. Video series. Disc one: 65 min; Disc two: 75 min. Villanova, PA: DECI. Available from NAEYC.

Steps you can take

Practice, practice, practice. When interacting with children, acknowledge specific details in their creations and efforts. Affirm their thoughts and feelings—not that they are right or wrong, but that you recognize that the children think this way or feel that way. The connections you make in these conversations will tell the child you care. Through trust comes growth, in both you and the child.

References

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