



Praise Pointers *What Encourages—or Discourages—Growth?*

The ways we praise each other make a lot of difference in whether that praise is encouraging and motivating. Here's how your praise can motivate each other.

Purposeful and sincere

“Great game! You really passed well to your teammates.” is more encouraging than “Great game!” If, however, you both know she or he didn't pass well or it wasn't a great game, then this isn't sincere, and it doesn't help her or him grow.

Reinforce behavior and effort, not “natural” intelligence

“Congratulations! I know you studied really hard” is more encouraging than, “Congratulations. You're really smart.” The first option focuses on an action that can be maintained or improved through intentional effort. If you praise someone because of something fixed (such as “being smart”), it's harder to cope with failure.

Attainable and realistic

“That is a beautiful picture. I love the colors you picked!” is more encouraging than, “That picture is amazing! It could go in an art gallery.” Inflated praise can backfire. It gives the impression that you have to meet exceptionally high standards, which you know you can't always do. That makes you less motivated.

Information rich

“I love the salad you made. It has a nice mix of flavors and colors!” is more encouraging than, “I love your salad!” Giving more detailed information reinforces strategies that can be used when similar situations come up in the future.

Self-focused, not in comparison to others

“I really like the spices you put in this dish” is more encouraging than, “This dish is better than the one Mom makes.” Praising in comparison to others may motivate when we always win. But we feel defeated when we don't always win, and we aren't motivated internally to learn and grow.

Effort more than achievement

“I like how you took deep breaths to stay calm even when you were upset at your sister.” is more encouraging than, “Thanks for not pushing your sister.” The focus on effort emphasizes being able to grow and learn.

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