



the
parent
practice



Never have to ask twice

Helping children develop good habits of co-operation

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Getting children to follow instructions can be a very frustrating aspect of parenting. When our children don't do as we ask, or don't do it until we've asked seven times or until we've raised our voices, it can leave us feeling impotent and sometimes we lose our cool. Most of us don't want to parent like despots but there are many occasions when children have to do what adults ask.

Adults have the experience, wisdom, perspective and mature brains that children don't have and it is our job as parents to teach our children right from wrong, keep them safe and encourage good habits for life. Children don't always see the point of what they're required to do – and sometimes they just don't want to do it.

We will be looking at ways of motivating children to want to do what is required of them, empathising with them when they don't want to and framing the instruction in a way that will make it more likely that they will do as asked, first time.

Children are willing to put aside their impulses to do what their parents ask and earn their approval when there is a warm and loving connection between parent and child and the child knows how to win the parent's approval. The child also needs to feel good about himself.

Why don't children do what they're asked to do?

- They have a different agenda from the adults – they would rather be playing or on their phones than tidying up or doing homework!
- They live in the moment and are impulsive and want to do what they want to do, when they want to do it and have a hard time doing something less appealing now for the sake of a future goal
- They are full of feelings – perhaps rebelliousness, frustration, anger, powerlessness or anxiety, or they may feel very controlled
- They may not understand the instruction or don't believe they can follow it
- They are tired, hungry, or engrossed in an activity and find it hard to listen
- They are not in the habit of co-operating – anyway when they do, nothing happens, and when they don't, nothing much happens, except perhaps a telling off which can just feel like an inevitable part of life!

What doesn't work to get a child to follow instructions?

Threatening and bribing and other forms of coercion or manipulation CAN work in the moment but they don't help develop good habits of co-operation or self-discipline in the long-term because the child is making decisions about what to do based on the prospect of what will happen to them next, not on whether the decision is a good one!

Feeling manipulated or coerced will also lead either to rebellion or docility. Investing in spending positive time with your child means you can rely on your influence with them rather than trying to force them to do what's required.

The Positive Cycle

Although we are hoping to have a positive impact on our children's behaviour when we nag, criticise, shout, threaten, bribe etc, it doesn't work. We want them to get things right and feel motivated and be responsible, but instead they stop listening, give up or answer back.

Many parents try to praise their children and often manage to do so, particularly when the parent is calm and relaxed and it is fairly easy to see that the child has done something well. However, most of us would also acknowledge that we quickly slip into habits of noticing and mentioning the things our children do wrong more often than the things they do right.

This is understandable as we are deeply conditioned to notice what's wrong with something. Our negativity bias evolved to keep us safe and to motivate us to take action about something that was 'wrong' so this is what we pay attention to. And when we criticise we do so with good intentions. We think that it will motivate our children to change their ways and behave better.



When parents do praise they generally use words such as “well done, good girl, clever boy, marvellous, fantastic, brilliant or cool”.

Conventional praise is generally this evaluative type of praise which contains a judgment of what the child has done.

Most adults will have received this kind of praise themselves as children and it is familiar to us so it is not surprising that we should use it with our own children. We praise our children in this way in the hope that we will boost their confidence and reinforce good behaviour.

But in fact this kind of praise doesn't make them feel good about themselves or encourage particular behaviour.

Motivation for any venture needs to feel like it comes from the inside. When it does it feels true. When it comes from outside it feels phony. Working primarily to gain others' approval takes away time and energy from a child's real job of figuring out their authentic talents, skills and interests.

Dr Madeline Levine, Price of Privilege

Why doesn't evaluative praise work?

Children don't believe it...

Children don't really believe they are marvellous, wonderful and brilliant.

They naturally compare themselves to other children and can always find evidence of someone who runs faster, climbs higher, draws better or does puzzles more adeptly than they can.

They may come to doubt the judgment of the person praising them. They think "that's nice of Dad, but he's supposed to praise me" or "he just wants me to feel good".

It shows no real interest and lacks detail...

Simply saying "that's great" doesn't require much effort or show much interest in what the child has done. It is easy to say without much thought.

And it doesn't provide enough information for the child to learn about the behaviour, or repeat it.

It loses value and credibility...

The superlative language often employed can be 'over the top'.

According to research by Judith Brook at New York University, once children hear meritless praise they discount sincere praise as well.

The focus is on achievement

The focus is on the outcome or the result of behaviour, rather than the effort or particular skill employed by the child. This makes the child feel that approval is conditional upon them achieving good results which makes for an insecure relationship with their parent and fragile self-esteem.

Studies by Carol Dweck have shown that the 'clever boy' kind of praise is actually damaging to children as it creates a Fixed Mindset, rather than a Growth Mindset.

Children praised for intelligence perform less well on tasks than children praised for effort.

Praising intelligence takes it out of the child's control and provides no recipe for responding to failure.

Carol Dweck



Evaluative praise can create a situation where children become dependent on the external assessment of them by others. They can become praise junkies and not value themselves unless they are receiving constant praise.

Descriptive Praise

Descriptive Praise is a different kind of praise that children (and adults) can't argue with. Descriptive Praise is factual. It is about noticing and mentioning exactly what the child has done right. This is what gives it credibility.

Descriptive Praise not only improves the general atmosphere of the home and a child's sense of being valued, but it is the most effective way to get our children to do the right thing. It is very effective in getting children to be more co-operative. When we point out what they're doing right it motivates our children to do more of that.

When we pay attention to their positive behaviour, rather than their negative actions, they will start to seek positive rather than negative attention. Remember it takes time to change the child's focus, so don't give up. It takes time to change our habits too.

Parents often think Descriptive Praise takes a lot of time but so does nagging and criticising and dealing with tantrums. And it gets easier with practice!

Descriptive Praise changes the mood so that the children are willing to co-operate. A lot of time is saved when children are co-operative so the investment of time pays huge dividends. When parents get into the habit of descriptively praising the children they get into the habit of listening to what you say!

Investing in the relationship with your child gives you a great deal more influence than any rule or consequence will ever do alone.

Describe the positive behaviours you see

However small or seemingly insignificant, and even when there are other things that need to be improved, focus on what is going right.

"You remembered to bring home your reading book."

"You looked at Miss March when she was talking to you then, that was polite."

"You went to get Ellie's nappy when I asked you to, that was co-operative."

"You're brushing your teeth without me having to remind you – what great initiative!"

"You got on your bike again even though you fell off just now – you're being brave."

Notice and mention steps in the right direction

Keep praise specific and detailed because it shows that the parent is paying attention. Accuracy and relevance is persuasive.

"You're sitting at the table at the right time and you've got all your books out. You look like you're getting ready to start your homework."

"You hung up your hat, so you've already done one of the three things you need to do when you come home."

"Sophie, you've taken your pyjamas off so you've taken the first step in getting dressed."

"You put your duvet on your bed. What's next?"

Focus on attitude, effort, good intention, improvement and strategies

“You kept on trying with these sums even though you didn’t find it easy. I call that persevering. Your efforts have paid off as five out of six are correct. I wonder if you can work out how to correct the sixth one?”

“I noticed that when the first approach you tried with your science project didn’t work you tried another tactic. How’s it going?”

“You had a smile on your face at the start of hockey practice and you were really putting effort into your running. That shows a great attitude.”

“These days your presentation is so much neater. You’ve remembered to underline the title and put the date on the page.”

“You’ve been sitting still for five minutes Glen. In another five minutes we’ll take a stretch.”

“I like the way you covered up the spelling word and tried to picture it in your head. That’s a good way to learn a word.”

“You’re really slowing down your writing so you can get it neat – look at all these letters on the line! You’ve got a capital letter too for George so that tells me you know names need to start with capital letters. There’s also a full stop at the end so I can see clearly where the sentence ends.”

Point out the quality of the behaviour

For example, maturity, self-control, responsibility, creativity, flexibility, courage, compassion, honesty, perseverance, etc. Building character is as important as the passing of tests. If you only praise performance-related behaviours children will learn this is all that matters so praise other desirable character traits that have nothing to do with performance, such as kindness.

“You waited until I finished talking before you said what you wanted to say. That was patient. It takes self-control to wait your turn.”

“Although you felt shy you still went and asked the waitress for the menu, you challenged yourself to be braver.”

“You stood up for yourself with your words when Ethan pushed you – saying ‘I don’t want to be pushed’ was a good choice.”

“You are being a really good friend Sam. You told Tom what the homework was and you even offered to help him with it.”

“Thanks for letting me know you were going to be late home, it meant I didn’t worry.”

“When you tell me that you like the meal I made it makes me feel appreciated, and not taken for granted.”

“Since you let your brother have a turn on your game, he is going to let you borrow his iPad.”

Keep praise focused on the individual

Make sure the praise is non-comparative to avoid children becoming conceited or thinking they are better than others. It is also important so the child knows they are uniquely appreciated by us, and not considered in relation to others.

“That’s a great result! And it reflects all the hard work and commitment that you put into your revision.” (Rather than "you did better than everyone else!")

“You ran your hardest in that race. I’m sure that’s faster than I’ve seen you run before.”

“You’ve been practicing getting dressed quickly and I’m sure you’re much faster than you were at the beginning of term. That must be helpful when you’re getting changed for sport.”

“Your marks are creeping up and it's due to all the effort you have been making to concentrate more. This is the best yet!”

Descriptive Praise helps our children continually redefine themselves as sensible, capable, loveable and considerate, as people who can be organised and kind and helpful, as creative, problem-solvers and deep-thinkers.

It lets children know exactly what we want them to do, gives them positive attention and it motivates them to do more of what is expected of them as they hear frequently that they are appreciated.

It works because it is believable. It may feel unfamiliar to start, but persevere. If you forget in the moment, say it later or write it down or text it!

The Magic Ratio

Research shows that to feel good, and be motivated, we need to hear at least five positive comments to each negative comment.

The Magic Ratio was developed by Professor John Gottman in his work with couples. He found that in happy and successful relationships each negative interaction was offset by five positives. This idea is now widely used in the corporate and sporting world.

However, it is estimated that on average, many children receive nine negative comments per day to each positive comment.

Keep an eye on the ratio in your home and keep moving towards the Magic Ratio of five positive comments to one negative comment.



Giving instructions effectively

When we give clear and concise positive instructions children are more likely to do what we've asked. We can minimise the number of instructions we need to give our children by setting up clear written or pictorial routines, and by asking them what they need to do rather than telling them. This is a vital step towards them doing their own thinking and deciding and it avoids children feeling overly controlled.

We can also make it easier for our children to do as they are asked by ensuring it is possible for them to do it. This means being realistic about what we ask them to do, taking into account their developmental stage and their temperament, and also being proactive about the physical environment – making sure there are coats/pegs where they can reach them, being clear about what is put away where, and providing a low-distraction environment in which to do homework.

PREPARE

Stop what you're doing and engage your child with Descriptive Praise.

INSTRUCT

Keep it simple. Say it clearly and once only.

Ask the child to repeat what they have to do.

FOLLOW THROUGH

Stay with the child and descriptively praise steps in the right direction and empathise if they don't want to.

"I can see you really don't want to tidy away your toys. You and Alex had so much fun playing with them but putting them away probably doesn't seem so much fun. I expect you're tired now and wish you could leave it to mummy. Also Alex has gone home so maybe it feels like it's not fair to have to do it all yourself. I wonder whether in future we should do some tidying up before your friend leaves? I really appreciate you not storming off or saying anything rude Jack and actually you've already started putting the lego away. That's a great start."



Whenever possible, avoid asking your child to do something new and difficult if he is tired or hungry or emotional, or you are! If it has to happen this way, take this into account. And remember to allow enough time for your child to do what they have been asked. Be a time realist, not a time optimist.

What Next?

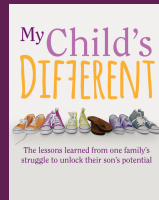
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Have you read Elaine Halligan's best selling book [My Child's Different](#) which tells the true story of her son Sam, who was written off by society at the tender age of 7, but went on to become a budding entrepreneur.

It gives hope to all parents and carers who for a variety of reasons may be concerned about what the future holds for their children, and demonstrates how, with the use of positive parenting skills, all children's potential can be unlocked. My Child's Different is a celebration of all the unique qualities those who are different bring to society.

It is really important that we provide young people with the support they need to succeed, and to understand dyslexia as a different and brilliant way of thinking. Alternative thinking can spur creativity and innovation and has the power to change the world. This book shows how with the right support, young people can maximise their potential.

Sir Richard Branson

Reading this book changed our whole family for the better.

Miranda Barlow

Really the best parenting book I've read!

Ms A E Moseley

