

Parenting Puzzles (March 2006)

Q: I've always thought children needed praise to develop healthy self-esteem, but a friend of mine recently told me that too much praise is not good for kids? Is it possible to praise a child too much?

A: Praise is an important aspect of parenting, and should be offered liberally to children. Praise is actually a behavior management technique. It is a form of positive reinforcement that can be used to increase those behaviors we wish to see in our children more often (e.g., cooperation, compliance, compassion). Most children (in truth, most humans) like to be praised and respond well to positive feedback. This assumes that the praise is genuine and is consistent with the situation or behavior. It makes children feel good about themselves and their accomplishments. However, it is possible to be "over the top" with one's praise. For example, by being overly enthusiastic about a relatively minor accomplishment, the praise can begin to lose its value. Children are able to detect insincerity and may experience the praise as a superficial attempt to cheer them up, rather than as an accurate form feedback about their behaviors or skills.

Keep these things in mind when praising your children:

- *Be in close proximity to your child.* It's better to praise a child when looking directly at them, rather than shouting it across the house.
- *Make a connection between the praise and the behavior being praised.* In this way the child has a concrete understanding of which action elicited the positive feedback.
- *Be sincere.* If a child has made mistakes or performed poorly, offer feedback about their efforts and their progress, as well as encouragement on which they can build future efforts and behaviors.
- *Be judicious.* Praise often, but not unconditionally. A child who is praised for every little thing he or she does begins, over time, to tune out that positive feedback.

Praise is a terrific way to help kids feel good about themselves. Don't hold back – go ahead and tell them when they've done something great! The positive response you get from your child will makes you feel good about yourself too!

Q: Here is a question that I'm sure you often get from members of the "Just Say Yes Generation". If my son, who is now 13, asks me if I have experimented with marijuana (or other drugs) what is the best answer to give him? I am a 30-year reformed cigarette smoker, and I have shared that with him. However, I'm not too sure how much good could come from sharing my own personal drug history with him...?

A: In truth, I'm not sure there is one correct answer. Some of your decision should be based on the type of person your son is. I know some parents who have shared with their kids the fact that they experimented with drugs when they were

teens; their kids then later argued that trying drugs was OK because “You did it; how can you tell me that I can’t??” Our kids don’t usually learn much from us when we share the wisdom of our years and experiences. Their position is that these are different times and we don’t really know what we’re talking about (or what life is like for them).

My advice is to **not** offer personal information, particularly if your son is not asking you directly. If he does ask you, consider the following options:

- Find a way to defer answering him by asking some of your own questions (e.g., *What makes you ask that now?*). This is a good way to get more information about where his questions are coming from (i.e., Is he thinking about using drugs? Does he know someone who is using?).
- If he persists in asking for personal information, you can tell him that things are different in 2006 than they were when you were in high school, and you don’t think that your personal information will help him make decisions in today’s world.
- You can also tell your son that you suspect if you say you did NOT experiment with drugs, this information may be used as evidence for why you don’t understand today’s teens, and if you say you DID experiment with drugs your answer may be used to justify his decisions about drugs. As a result, you opt not to answer the question at all!

This is a really tough question. I’d encourage to talk with other parents and find out more about what they are doing. At a minimum, you’ll feel less isolated in this decision-making process.