

What is effective praise?

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Statement of the problem

Teacher praise has long been advocated as a means of motivating and rewarding school students. Some contemporary critics argue, however, that teacher praise may be harmful and may serve to diminish the intrinsic motivation of students.

Proposed solution/intervention

Teachers should employ praise in a consistent way based on what the research evidence has shown to be most effective and should avoid using praise in counterproductive ways.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

The use of teacher praise to influence student classroom behaviour is based on applied behaviour analysis, specifically reinforcement theory. Behaviour that is followed by reinforcing consequences increases in frequency. Teacher praise is known to be a reinforcer for many students. By employing praise as a consequence in a systematic way, contingent upon appropriate student behaviour, teachers may increase the amount of time students spend behaving appropriately in the classroom. This is sometimes known as 'Positive Teaching'.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

The research on use of teacher praise reveals that whereas teachers typically praise students frequently for academic behaviour (producing good work), they very rarely praise students for appropriate social behaviour in the classroom. Conversely, while they are less likely to reprimand students for poor work, they reprimand students for inappropriate classroom behaviour at very high rates. Numerous experimental studies carried out over many years have demonstrated unequivocally that teachers can increase the amount of time students spend behaving appropriately by reducing their rate of reprimands to inappropriate behaviour and concentrating on praising instances

of appropriate social behaviour. Praising students for what they already do well, however, may serve to decrease their intrinsic motivation.

Some simple rules for praising

1. Praise the behaviour, not the person.
2. Praise quickly and consistently.
3. Praise only actual instances of the desired behaviour; i.e., praise contingently.
4. Praise specifically and descriptively.
5. Decrease praise for frequent appropriate behaviours.
6. Privately delivered praise may be more effective for older students.

Conclusions

Effective praise is not about making continual positive statements unrelated to behaviour (e.g., 'Good girl!'). Praise delivered non-contingently or directed to the person or product rather than to a specific desired behaviour could be less effective. Similarly, lavishly praising behaviour that is already learned and frequent may also be counterproductive. But praising students contingently for behaving appropriately is a powerful means of increasing appropriate classroom behaviour.

Key references

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