

Original URL: <http://life.familyeducation.com/parenting/discipline/45283.html>

FamilyEducation

Use Positive Reinforcement

Using positive reinforcement to encourage and reward proper behavior is the fifth element of the [Twelve Disciplinary Elements](#). Here are a couple of universal statements: Everybody wants approval for who he is and for what he does. And, everybody wants to please, especially children, and especially *your* child who wants to please *you*. Can that really be? Then why do children misbehave? We'll tackle that big question later but until then, take it from me and the experts, kids just wanna be good.

How can you “let” your kids be good, increase positive behavior, and decrease and prevent misbehavior quickly and painlessly? Here's a start: by accentuating the positive. (Remember that old song by Harold Arlan and Johnny Mercer? “You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, and don't mess with Mr. In-Between.”) One terrific way to accentuate behavior you like to see (and take the emphasis off negative behavior) is by using positive reinforcement.

It Works Like This

Positive reinforcement is a simple, reality-based technique that can help turn your child's behavior around—often *very* quickly. Here's the recipe:

1. Your child wants your approval very badly.
2. You notice and comment on specific positive behavior and provide natural and logical rewards.
3. Your child feels noticed, validated, and approved of, the good behavior increases, and misbehavior is prevented or decreases.

Words to Parent By

Positive reinforcement reinforces what the child is doing right rather than concentrating on what the child is doing wrong. It increases the likelihood that the behavior will be repeated. It supports your child's positive deeds and qualities through enthusiasm, descriptive encouragement, and natural, logical rewards.

4. Your child also begins to recognize the value of his own positive qualities and actions.

Positive reinforcement is at play every time your child brings home his report card, or every time you get a bonus at work. But positive reinforcement works best when it isn't a once-in-a-while thing; the more it happens, the more effective it is. That means daily.

For instance, comment when your child for once does something without being told. Focus on positive behavior (“John, I noticed you remembered to take your clothes off the floor. Now the puppy won't be able to chew them.”). Don't focus on the negative (“You hung up your jacket, for once!”), and don't link it to a judgment on the child's personality (“What a good child you are for hanging up your jacket!”).

Tally Ho!

Just how much positive reinforcement do you offer your child? You probably offer some already, most parents naturally do. Yet no matter how good at it you think you are, you may be surprised to find that, in reality, most parents focus on the negative. How much negativity is creeping into *your* parenting?

Learning to parent well is a process, and there is always room for improvement. It *is* helpful to look at the problem areas. Here's an easy little exercise inspired by the work of James Windell (author of *8 Weeks to a Well-Behaved Child*) that lets you clearly see how many negative and critical remarks you make. (Hey, try the exercise! You may be pleasantly surprised!)

Get a little notebook at the supermarket. A *little* one. Smaller. One that can fit in a pocket or a purse. Get a pen, too, and put it in the pocket or purse next to the notebook. Ready to begin?

Every time you make a critical or negative comment about your child, open the notebook and make a little mark. If you have time, write down what you said and the circumstances. Do it for five days, and don't try to change what you are doing, just make notes. That's it! (Well, that's almost it.)

- Don't share this exercise (or the fact that you are doing it) with your child. That may mean excusing yourself to the bathroom frequently, or dashing off to another room to make your tally marks, but if you share the fact that you are doing this little experiment, your kids might get upset, you'll start adjusting your behavior, and the exercise's results won't be accurate.
- If you have more than one child, label a page for each one, and keep a separate tally.
- Make sure you count feedback that starts out positive but includes a “but” as in: “I really appreciate you doing the dishes, Samantha, *but* please try and rinse the soap off better next time.”
- Pay special attention when you are angry, disappointed, tired, or hungry (people tend to get *very* crabby and critical when their blood sugar levels are low).

Behave Yourself!

No wimps allowed! Not everything your child does is great, and if you pretend it is, you're doing your child a disservice.

It's a Good Idea!

Pay attention to what's going on with your child's heart, mind, life, and you'll be able to prevent a lot of discipline problems.

At the end of five days, take a deep breath and add up your tally. There's no magic number—whether your reaction is “Arrghhh!” or “Wow!” it doesn't matter. Knowledge is necessary (even when it is painful). What did you find? Have a lot of tally marks in your notebook?) If you're like most parents, you parent more through criticism than through positive reinforcement. We simply expect kids to behave themselves (without giving them a lot of tools to know how) and then when they don't, we hit the roof. Sound familiar? Look again at your tally sheet. Don't feel bad, this is just a place to begin. Nobody but you is counting your tally (aren't you glad you kept it private now?) and you can tear up the pages in that teeny notebook, if you like.

Most of us are in fire-fighting mode most of the time, trying to get things done, get through life relatively intact, and put out the behavior fires as they flare. It seems easier to notice what's annoying or troubling than it is to notice how wonderful your child really is. Some parents are so afraid of raising a stuck-up little monster that they bend over backwards to never give a compliment, or describe positive behavior. Not a good

idea.

Doing an exercise like Tally Ho! will help you become aware of your expectations for your child, and your patterns of treatment. If you have more than one child, the exercises will show you the differences in treatment and expectations. Once you become aware of it, bingo! You can change!

The “Let's Get Positive” Exercise

If you're used to focusing on negative behavior, it can be hard to start using positive reinforcement techniques. Let's practice being positive. In order to give positive reinforcement, you need to recognize specifically what to reinforce. Once you recognize the positive behavior, you can use descriptive encouragement. Here's a quick exercise for you. Just for the next day or so:

- Make a list of things your child does right or well.
- Blow off the negative (let it go free!).
- Frame each positive thing in positive terminology (“He got dressed easily and got along with his sister at breakfast”) instead of in the negative (“he didn't fight getting dressed, for once, and he didn't whack Nikki at breakfast”).
- Notice how the behavior of even a “misbehaving” child is mostly positive.

Tales from the Parent Zone

Every morning, when I get into my car to drive my daughter to school, the most obnoxious beeping noise occurs until I buckle my seat belt. This is “negative reinforcement,” and it can be an effective way of encouraging proper behavior. In order to get rid of that bleeping beep, I buckle up. A balance between negative and positive reinforcement is important for a child's development.

Prevent Problems with Descriptive Encouragement

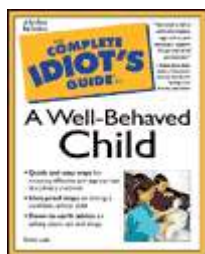
If you tell a child he's a pathetic, sniveling worm, he'll either go to the garden and start eating dirt, or he'll rebel, move to the other coast, and never speak to you again (and good for him!). If, on the other hand, you support and encourage him, he'll do his best for you. When you're using encouragement:

- *Keep it very specific.* “I noticed you worked for an hour on your homework.” “You certainly emptied the dishwasher fast and well!” The more specific you get, the more your child will learn to figure out for herself when she is doing a good job.
- *Say it deliberately.* Remind yourself to comment on positive behavior. It takes awhile to make this kind of commentary second nature, so it will have to be deliberate for a while. It may even feel forced. That's okay!
- *Effort counts.* You can give descriptive encouragement for effort even if the results don't turn out so well. “You worked very hard on your homework, Adam. I'm sure next time you will get the right answer.”
- *Focus on improvement.* “Your arms have gotten much stronger from all the swimming practice you've been doing.”
- *Say it often.*

It's Not Praise, and It's Not General

When you're using encouragement, steer away from the following pitfalls:

- General encouragement, “You're a great kid!” and “You're so smart!” is nice to hear, but it isn't very effective at promoting change. General encouragement too often shows that you aren't really paying enough attention to the child, or her process, to make thoughtful, helpful, respectful comments about her behavior. Some experts think too much praise or general encouragement can even be damaging, making a child dependent on others for positive feedback. In other words, “How am I doing, Mom,” replaces, “Wow, I'm doing great” or, “I kinda flubbed that test, I'd better work harder.”
- There's a school of parenting (I think it's affiliated with Wimpy University) that praises kids all the time. “Excellent job walking down the street, Emily.” Too much of this constant, empty praise, and your child will stop trusting you, or even listening. “Great job!” becomes empty, unless you mean it.
- Never lie to your child about how he's doing. If you tell a kid what a scholar he is when he's earning the lowest grades in the school district, you're lying, and both of you will know it. Your child is not stupid. Encourage the positive (“You're working hard to do well next time,” or “It took courage to risk and fail”)—but don't *lie*.
- There's nothing wrong with hearing that you're a great kid (it promotes a general sense of being loved and approved of), but it works best when it's very specific. Telling a child, “Wow, you're so mature” puts a lot of stress on a child to be mature, to never be immature, and to never disappoint you. Children under this kind of stress tend to rebel, hard.



Excerpted from *The Complete Idiot's Guide to a Well-Behaved Child* © 1999 by Ericka Lutz. All rights reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. Used by arrangement with **Alpha Books**, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

To order this book visit the [Idiot's Guide](http://www.idiotsguide.com) web site or call 1-800-253-6476.

© 2000-2008 Pearson Education, Inc. All Rights Reserved.