

Praise: A Way of Encouraging Students

Praising students when they do good work in the classroom can encourage them to continue that good work. Praise can be especially helpful to reluctant or unmotivated students. But some kinds of praise are better than others. Here are a few guidelines:

- Praise should be honest and sincere. Indiscriminate or overstated praise will be recognized as dishonest by students. A student who is praised for mediocre work will become cynical or will feel like a fraud.
- Teachers should not praise all the time. If they do, students may no longer strive to do their best. Too much praise may also lead students to depend on the opinions of others to determine their self-worth.
- Praise can be a good way of encouraging, by pointing out how a student has progressed. Example: “Jacob, you named the four Gospel writers and listed their Gospels in the correct order. That is something you could not have done last year.”
- It’s a good idea to focus praise on the student’s effort instead of the product. Example: “Maria, you studied hard and did well on the test.” Or: “Anna, you practiced carefully all week and recited the prayer with no mistakes.”
- Teachers should avoid sarcastic praise. Do not say, “Well, it’s nice to see you sitting quietly for a change.” Do not say, “You actually have your book open to the correct page. I can hardly believe it!”
- Specific praise is helpful to students because it lets them know what behavior they should continue. Example: “Good, Michael, you raised your hand to offer an answer.” If the teacher only says, “Good, Michael,” the student may not be sure what behavior the teacher wants him to continue.
- Similarly, a teacher might give specific praise to the whole class. Example: “Nice work, everyone, you got to your seats and got pencils out so now we can begin promptly.” This tells students what the teacher wants them to continue doing in the future. Merely saying, “Nice work, everyone” fails to give students a specific clue from the teacher.
- Praise should not be expressed by comparing students. If a student is told, “You are the best writer in the class,” it puts pressure on the student not to fail to be “the best” all the time. It also can make other students resentful and unnecessarily competitive.
- It is wise to give praise that lets the student be the focus. Instead of saying, “I am proud of you for doing such good work,” a teacher can say, “You must be proud of such good work.”
- Finally, teachers should remember that they don’t always have to use words to give praise. A smile, a wink, a nod can also tell students that they have done a good job.