



Hone Your Skills When Using Reinforcers and Reprimands

-- Leslie E. Packer, PhD

Some parents and teachers are extraordinarily adept at the effective use of praise, reprimands, and behavioral interventions, but most parents and teachers of “high maintenance” children can benefit from some pointers or tips, so here are a few tips.

To increase the effectiveness of praise, keep it:

- Contingent: praise the targeted behavior when it occurs and only when it occurs
- Specific: in your praise, include a brief description of the behavior you are praising (e.g., “Great organizing of your papers, Johnny!”)
- Sincere

Remember, however, that even the most effective praise is probably not enough to establish new routines. Use extrinsic rewards as well as praise at the beginning of training. Rewards don't have to be material items, but can also include enjoyable activities such as special one-to-one time reading a book together, a walk on the beach together, staying up a bit later, being the school librarian's assistant, etc.

To increase the effectiveness of reprimands:

- Keep it short: use the child's name plus two words
- Keep it soft: audible only to the child
- Be close: you should be within arm's length when delivering the reprimand
- Touching the child on the shoulder may help, but that varies by child and situation
- Try to get -- but do not force -- eye contact
- Do not engage in “public hangings”

Persuasion vs. Attribution:

Using attribution (“You're being a good organizer” or “you're working hard at organizing yourself”) is more effective than trying to persuade the child by saying things like “You should be more organized” or “you should try harder to organize yourself.” Using attribution also conveys high, positive expectations for behavior. This approach (attribution) can be applied to academic and social behaviors.

Praise desirable behavior and ignore misbehavior or infractions? Maybe not.....

Although many parents ask teachers to ignore misbehavior, keep in mind that ignoring misbehavior or undesirable behavior doesn't promote appropriate behavior. Yes, you need to prioritize and consider how much you target at one time, and whether the behavior is likely to be modifiable through environmental changes and other supports, but ignoring misbehavior doesn't necessarily extinguish it and may only allow the misbehavior to become a bad habit. Just some food for thought....