

Behavior-specific Praise Reinforces Good Behavior



Question

How can I make my verbal praise more effective?

Answer

Words like “nice job,” “fantastic,” and “awesome” reinforce good behavior and motivate people to do good things. We all like to hear them and most of us use them often in our daily interactions with children, students, loved ones, and friends. Those of us who work with individuals with special needs find verbal praise particularly effective. It is the easiest form of positive reinforcement you can provide. It does not cost anything, and it never runs out.

However, although verbal praise is an extremely effective teaching tool, it can sometimes be too broad and too generic. Expressions like “nice job,” “fantastic,” and “awesome,” are not specific and they do not let individuals know which behavior is being praised.

Behavior analysts understand the importance of rewarding appropriate behavior and often use what is called behavior-specific praise to let the people they are working with know exactly which behavior is being rewarded.

“Nice job making your bed” provides praise for a specific action – making a bed. “Fantastic! You got a ‘B’ on your test” uses verbal praise to reward an academic accomplishment. If you are working with students who are learning to spell or count, “good spelling,” and “awesome counting,” are great ways to specifically praise these skills.

When providing verbal praise, it is not only important to be specific, but also to convey sincerity and enthusiasm through your body language, which

can make your words of praise more meaningful. Imagine working overtime to complete a report that is due to your supervisor at the end of the week. You give the file to your supervisor who simply says, “Thanks – good job.” You received verbal praise for your hard work, but imagine how much better it would have been if your supervisor had smiled, looked you in the eye, reached out to shake your hand, and enthusiastically said, “Hey, thanks for finishing this report! I appreciate the extra time you put in. You are such an asset to our organization.” In both scenarios, your supervisor used verbal praise to reward your hard work. But, which example is more likely to reinforce your behavior and make you want to get started on the next report? The difference between the two scenarios is that in the first one the supervisor used general praise, while in the second one s/he used behavior-specific praise. In the second example, the praise also incorporated pleasant body language, appropriate physical contact, and included a compliment.

Whether you are giving general or behavior-specific praise, it is important to remember that reinforcement should be provided immediately after the good behavior has been exhibited. Waiting too long may decrease the power of the reward and may also inadvertently reinforce some unexpected or unwanted behavior exhibited some time after the good behavior, but before you provided the reinforcement. It is also important to remember to alternate your words of praise, as the same words may lose their impact over time. You can also provide tangible items, such as food and toys, and appropriate physical contact, such as a light pat on the shoulder, a high five, or a handshake, along with verbal praise. These additions enhance the reinforcement provided, particularly for individuals with special needs. You may, however, want to gradually reduce the frequency of these extra physical reinforcers so the individual does not come to rely on them. Verbal praise is a great way to show someone you are pleased with his or her performance. While general praise is good, behavior-specific praise goes one step further, identifying exactly which behavior pleases you. When you offer behavior-specific praise, you are giving the individual positive attention and highlighting his or her good behavior. Your enthusiasm and sincerity enhance this type of reinforcement and show people that not only are you paying attention to them, but you also appreciate what they are doing.

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