

## Encouraging Words of Praise Jo-An Vargo

I can still remember a key teachable moment in my professional experience. However, this time I was the student!

I was teaching in California in the early 1980's under the leadership of a very skillful head of school (I'll refer to her as AJ) who had a doctorate in psychology. Part of the school's professional development plan required that we videotape our teaching over the course of several days and then view the tape to identify some key aspects of our best practices. My head of school would also view the tape and read my written reflections. We would then sit down to discuss our impressions of my work.

I viewed the tape and considered my words of praise as an indication of my positive interactions with students - words that would motivate them through challenges and help them persevere. My personal teachable moment occurred when AJ asked me to examine the specific language I was using. You see, my intentions were right on target, but I was using what is now termed "automatic praise". In other words, my language was too general to be truly meaningful for the child. I was using words like *terrific job*, *beautiful writing*, *good try*, *awesome effort*, or *I like it*.

One of AJ's favorite expressions was "Research says . . ." I heard that phrase during this professional review because an article had just been published examining the function of praise in the classroom. AJ helped me understand that although I was expressing approval and trying to provide a motivating message, I wasn't giving my students the opportunity to engage in real communication with me about their work. Nor was I providing them with the type of specific encouragement that would allow them to begin to examine their own learning process and their own attitude about their end product.

It took some practice, but I learned how to extend my thinking and expand my language. Instead of *terrific job*, I learned to ask "What part of this makes you proud?" That asks the child to examine his/her own work and takes me out of the role of judge.

Rather than praising a student's *beautiful writing*, I learned to notice specifics, e.g. "I noticed that you checked over your sentences and looked at the Word Wall to make sure that your 'lifetime words' were spelled correctly." This type of observation helps a child know that he/she employed a learning strategy that is useful for editing one's work.

In place of a generic *good try* or *awesome effort*, I realized that I could encourage a child by acknowledging his effort more effectively. "You are learning that sometimes it's all right to take a little break when you're facing a hard part and then come back to the job when you've got a little more patience with yourself. Look at how much you've accomplished after your drink and some time away from this difficult math page."

And, lastly, I recognized that the words *I like it* take the child's end product and judges it instead of guiding child's process of working through the task and making a real effort to complete or improve his level of achievement. This makes a youngster rely on adult approval instead of themselves.

A great many more studies have now been completed about this topic of praise and, to borrow one of AJ's favorite phrases, research says that automatic praise statements can actually harm a child's development! We want to encourage children to recognize their own efforts and develop work habits that make them successful learners. I hope this story of my own teachable moment might help you examine the language you use to offer praise and encouragement to your child. I realize that my lesson from AJ certainly stuck with me because I can recall it so clearly as I write this!