

# THE BEST & WORST IN



# PRAISE

The subtle art of bringing out the best in each and every student. **By Emily Richards**

**H**ave you ever told a student “I’m so proud of you. Great job!” and gotten nothing more than a bored stare in response? What’s up with that? Isn’t praise supposed to boost confidence and make kids happy? Aren’t we always told to praise early and praise often?

Nearly every successful grown-up—

actresses, brain surgeons, and teachers alike—can tell you a heartwarming story about the time a teacher gave them the compliment that lifted them up, giving them permission to become great. But as expert Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer tells us, there’s good praise, and there’s bad praise. “Praising well is a subtle art,” says the author of *Talking to Tweens*. “How you phrase it can make a huge

difference in whether a child feels freed and encouraged by your comments or, despite your good intentions, becomes anxious or even angry.”

We asked Hartley-Brewer to share some tips on the best—and worst—ways to praise students, keeping in mind that what works for some doesn’t always work for others. Use this handy list of do’s and don’ts to rate your own praising skills, and get a few pointers for mastering the fine art of praise while you’re at it.

## **DO** INCREASE YOUR VOCABULARY.

“Good is such a bad word,” Hartley-Brewer says, “when it comes to ensuring that praise is effective. It is bad because it is inadequate; it says so little.” Consider banishing the words “good” and “bad” from your classroom vocabulary. After all, what clues do the words give about what was done correctly, or poorly? Instead, try using description—a “well-argued” paper, an “insightful” poem, or a “beautifully drawn” map. If you stick to this rule in your class, you’ll start to notice that your students pick up on it, too, and become better at handing out their own compliments and criticisms. Raise the bar.

## **DON’T** JUST PRAISE WHAT THEY DO. APPROVE OF WHO THEY ARE.

Praise shouldn’t be limited to compliments on a job well done. One of the purposes of praise is to make children feel noticed and accepted unconditionally. Sometimes a simple “You have a great imagination,” or even, “I notice that you really like tennis,” can do wonders toward making students feel appreciated.

“We do not have to wait for any particular event or achievement to speak out,” reminds Hartley-Brewer.

## **DO** CUSTOM FIT PRAISE TO YOUR STUDENTS’ GRADE LEVEL.

As a teacher, you know that first grade praise doesn’t work on sixth graders. Keep in mind that until about second grade, children see the world in black and white terms, says Hartley-Brewer, “which also means that they see themselves in the same simple terms, as



## LEARN YOUR LINES!

Not all praise is helpful. It's all in the phrasing, says Hartley-Brewer. Teaching yourself a few praise tricks may pay off with a more motivated class.

INSTEAD OF ...	TRY ...	HERE'S WHY
“I've been watching you and noticed that you are a great tutor to your classmates.”	“I bet Sarah appreciates the help you gave her on her writing project. That's very generous of you.”	Focusing your praise on the good action, instead of on how you noticed it, ensures that children won't feel “spied upon.”
“Justin, you've made me really proud.”	“You deserve to feel proud of your achievement, Justin.”	“I'm so proud of you” is a least favorite phrase with kids. Instead, encourage children to feel pride in themselves.
“Wow, Isabella, this poem is so beautiful!”	“You've used so many sensory wintry details that your readers will need mittens.”	If you only say “great poem,” your student won't ever know why it's good, and may even doubt you.
“Eric, yours was the very best essay in the class!”	“Eric, I enjoyed reading your explanation of the Trojan War. You really pushed yourself.”	If it's not your goal to make students competitive with each other, don't couch praise in comparison.

either a good kid or a bad kid.” Consider instituting a balance sheet rule: three pieces of praise for every criticism.

With older children, Hartley-Brewer advises us to “lie low, save your celebrations for the notable successes, and in the meantime, focus on affirmation.”

### **DO** GIVE HIGH FIVES.

Some of the best praise is non-verbal. Add some high-fives and handshakes to your repertoire, says Hartley-Brewer. Plus “stickers, kind comments written on homework pages, and simply a warm tone of voice” convey approval and support. “If you stand close while you look over work,” she writes, “you can show young students you care about them and feel comfortable in their presence.”

### **DON'T** WAIT FOR THEM TO CROSS THE FINISH LINE.

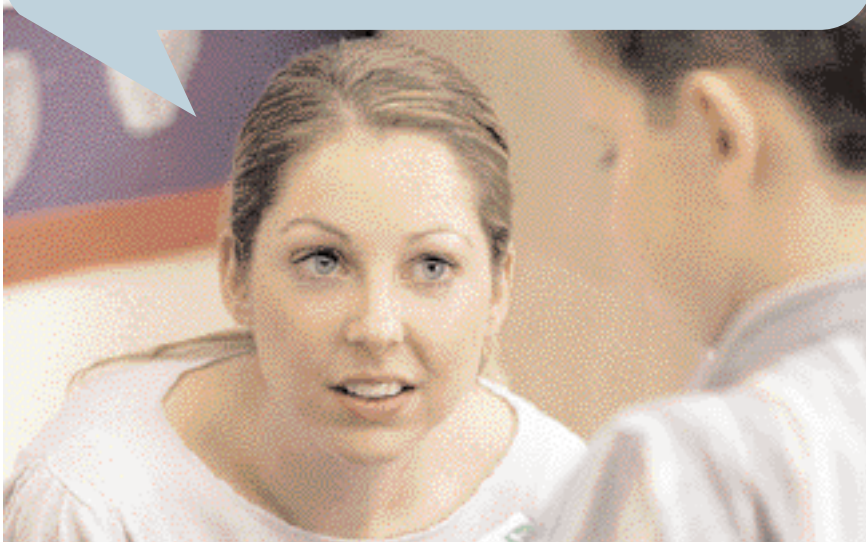
Success is a process, as all teachers know. A good science project, for instance, is the result of many separate right choices and hard work. Instead of waiting until the final grading, use praise during the process to keep your students on track, help them pick up the pace if necessary, and gain confidence in their work, not just their product.

### **DO** GET SPECIFIC.

If one of the primary goals of praise is to encourage good work, then praise should include information about what *exactly* good work is. Only when they know what they did well can students make sure to repeat their success. In a way, specific praise fulfills the exact function of constructive criticism, only it's more fun to receive!

### **DON'T** BE WOWED BY NEATNESS.

Often teachers get a special thrill from super-neat homework. Neatness shows diligence and care (and is easier to read!). Don't overpraise neatness, Hartley-Brewer warns, “Neatness can be contrived as a diversion from content, with a child believing the words alone to be not quite good enough; it can be used as...the makeup and lipstick applied lovingly to the assignment.” Remember that



when you praise and encourage neatness, it's not the same thing as praising and encouraging good thinking.

### **DO** MEAN WHAT YOU SAY.

The number one most surprising thing Hartley-Brewer learned from the children she studied? Their ability to see through false praise. “Both girls and boys,” she says, “shared how they see through praise so easily. And they don't like it, and they react to it.” So next time you're about to tell a little white lie, consider keeping quiet until you can think of a compliment or observation you really, truly mean.

“The children I've interviewed say they particularly value teachers' approval and praise,” says Hartley-Brewer, “because the teachers knew better than their parents what really was expected of them at school, and, therefore, what really was good work.”

### **DON'T** GUSH.

“Of course,” Hartley-Brewer writes, “it is better to sound pleased than to describe pleasure with a deadpan expression and a flat voice.” However, she warns, “too much fervor can not only sound fake but also create too much tension around the requirement to continue to deserve the accolades. If praise is about appreciation,” she reminds us, “and appreciation involves estimating the worth of something, we need to match the applause to the achievement.” Save your “wows” and “amazings!” for the really impressive work. Sometimes, a simple “Nice, you finished it on time,” will do.

### **DO** PRAISE EN MASSE.

You are probably reaching more children than you know! Hartley-Brewer tells a story from her own childhood: “I was working very hard—huffing and puffing—in a keep-fit class, and the teacher at the front said, “That's really good,” to everybody. But I took it personally.” Your comments to the class at large are often as encouraging as one-on-one praise. Plus, praise of your entire class can engender esprit de corps among the children and make everyone feel good.

### **DON'T** FORGET BOYS AND GIRLS ARE SOMETIMES DIFFERENT.

Although she admits there are plenty of exceptions to the rule, Hartley-Brewer asserts that while girls tend to thrive on more outright praise, boys tend to be easily embarrassed. Boys, she says, “are more inclined to feel potentially manipulated by praise and to accept it less willingly because they detect an ulterior motive.” When praising boys, consider keeping it short and sweet. Slip in some praise privately, in the hallways, or as your class is filing out of the room.

### **DON'T** IGNORE FAILURE.

When teachers talk up students' achievements, but become silent in the face of failure, the message is: Failure is too shameful to talk about. Pointing out where work is not up to par, Hartley-Brewer says, “provides factual and neutral information on what went wrong, what has not been understood fully, and on what needs to be changed.”

### **DO** REMEMBER TO ACCEPT PRAISE FOR YOURSELF, TOO.

People who don't receive or give themselves pats on the back are much less likely to give praise to others. So get used to getting praise, even if you have to ask for it—it will make you a more supportive teacher!

Learning to praise ourselves, says Hartley-Brewer, “will act as a boost and help us to be positive and encouraging.” But what if you've had an awful day at school, where all your lesson plans fell flat and your kids' “listening ears” seemed to be permanently switched off? “Remember the lessons that soar,” says Hartley-Brewer, “and the many times you have had your students' rapt attention.”

At the same time, think of all the other ways you evaluate yourself—as a parent, partner, son or daughter, community member—and be positive about your overall contribution. You'll probably realize that you really do deserve a gold star just as much as your students do! □

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