

A Gift of Love

Using Praise Wisely

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Children and teens love praise. Their faces beam when we tell them, “Wow, you made the bed without wrinkles!” We all like to be acknowledged for a job well done. But there is a far more meaningful way we can recognize our children that supports their growth and builds a close and loving relationship. Curious?

I can best describe what I’m talking about through my own story:

I was on the phone trying to write down directions to an important appointment when my son Derek came running in from school shouting at the top of his lungs. “Mom! I want to go to John’s house!” When I got off the phone my first thought was to say, “Okay, settle down. I’m busy now. You can go, but not ‘till you finish your chores.”

Then something told me I was missing an opportunity. Derek was happier and more excited than usual. I decided to put aside what I was doing for a few minutes and see what was really going on for him.

As I listened and tried to understand his world, I finally “read between the lines” and realized why he was so delighted by his friend’s invitation. Derek was beginning to feel accepted; he was making friends at his new school.

Derek glowed when I said “I’m really excited for you. It feels so good when someone shows they like you.”

So often we praise children for things that matter to us: looking neat or pretty, taking out the trash, or being on time—things they may care little about. There’s nothing wrong with complimenting that behavior; everyone likes praise and it does encourage children and teens to do the things we want them to do.

But noticing what matters to them—and being genuinely enthusiastic about it—proves to be a much deeper way to recognize and connect with our children.

The more I paid attention to Derek's world and really listened, the more I could see what he cared about. "I got my first basket; the kids gave me a high five!" That didn't seem impressive until I slowed down. Derek was delighted that he was improving in sports and becoming more comfortable with his peers. Only then was I able to genuinely share his pleasure: "Gee! That must have felt great!"

The more I could see life through my son's eyes, the more he was able to respect the things I cared about and the more cooperative he became.

We want children to grow and become responsible. It's our job to be sure that they do. We can help them by recognizing and nurturing their yearning to become the best they can be. We support this natural drive when we take time to listen, when we discover our children's leading edge, and act as their cheerleaders.

Paying attention to their passions—and then sharing their enthusiasm—is one of the greatest gifts you can give. A gift that will be returned to you many times over.