

# Words of Encouragement

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Have you fallen into the habit of either barking commands or doling out praise at the children in your classroom? "Pick that up. Go back to your center. Use your words. Get down from there. Good job! I'm proud of you! You're so smart! What a pretty girl! What a handsome fella! You're so artistic! You're the best! Good boy! Good girl!" But you are not a drill sergeant, and they are not dogs. Woof.



When praise is unexpected or spontaneous, it remains a powerful motivating force. However, when praise is merely about making a judgment, "Good job!" or "You're so smart!" it can actually be detrimental to children and cause them to stop trying due to a fear of failure. When you praise kids for their intelligence and other innate abilities, they learn to view their failures as evidence of stupidity and do not persevere. They do not think they can do any better and they become afraid to try. They may fail to develop the life skill of "buoyancy" or "bouncing back" when faced with difficulty.

Children who receive *praise of their efforts*, such as "you worked hard on that," rather than praise of their personal qualities, such as "you're a good girl," are more likely to prefer challenging tasks and to believe that hard work can improve intelligence and personality, new research at the University of Chicago reveals.

The kind of praise focused on effort, called process praise, "sends the message that effort and actions are the sources of success, leading children to believe they can improve their performance through hard work," said Elizabeth Gunderson, assistant professor of psychology at Temple University.

When you give a child descriptive praise, you don't just tell him he's doing well. You give him specific feedback, and you tell him something about your (age-appropriate) standards for him.

One more hint: It's also important to speak aloud when you are struggling with something and let the kids see you fail and try again before succeeding. Talk about things you did not do well at first, but did better with practice. The children will not notice unless point them out and talk about them. Even something as simple as over filling or splashing milk when filling cups for lunch, "Oops, I didn't do that very well, did I? Let me try again." Or when you are changing a bulleting board. If you are not happy with your first attempt, talk about it. Ask for a child's input. "What do you think about this bulletin board? It doesn't seem quite right to me. I think I can do better, but I'm not sure how." Look at you, Mrs. Teacher, teaching those life skills! High five!

Thank you for your help!  
You should be proud of yourself!  
Wow! You tried again and you did better!  
You worked really hard on that!  
Our classroom looks great! You guys worked hard at clean up time!  
Thank you for helping [friend' name] when she was [sad, hurt, cleaning up].  
I noticed you invited [friend's name] to play with you.  
What do you think about it?  
You seem to really enjoy [math/science/art/games/running].  
That's a tough one. Will you try one more time to figure it out?  
That's a tough one. Let's figure it out together.  
I trust you.  
Way to stick with it!

You did it!  
Look at you, working so hard!  
That's a very good observation.  
Look how happy [friend's name] is with the toy you shared with him.  
Thank you for taking turns.  
Thank you for your cooperation.  
You were angry, and you talked about it.  
That was a right choice.  
You've really got the hang of it!  
You figured it out!  
Let's just stop and look at this. Doesn't it make you smile?  
High five!  
You are such a special part of our class.  
I can tell you spent a lot of time on this.  
I love being with you.

This list was adapted from an article by Amy McCreedy, *Encouraging Words*