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Raising and Praising Boys

Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

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For Richard.
And with grateful thanks to all the young people
and adults who shared their stories with me.



Introduction

This book has been written for parents with boys of any age – babies, toddlers or teenagers – and for teachers. Most of the tips cover general principles that have broad application but several relate to the ages and stages of child development, acknowledging children's changing needs and perceptions. One of the most important lessons we have learnt over the last two to three decades is how much children, regardless of their age, benefit from receiving praise from parents and teachers. Children respond far better to positive feedback and encouragement than they do to threats, criticism and punishment. Many parents and teachers found it hard to use what they felt to be fulsome words, especially with boys; and although some still find it hard, most people are now sufficiently familiar and comfortable with common phrases to give praise in good measure.

Praise has been viewed as the way to boost children's self-esteem, to help them feel confident and to fulfil their potential and be at ease with themselves. Many won't realise that using praise also has wider benefits for individual children and society, because it can help to encourage self-discipline and moral behaviour. However, nothing about parenting or children is straightforward. Boys and girls, for example, often react to praise in different ways and need their confidence reinforced in different areas. We are also beginning to realise that if

praise is over-used, used for particular personal motives or directed at the wrong kind of activity, it may actually be unhelpful. When praise is over-used, over-hyped or belies the truth, boys may either become praise dependent and require constant affirmation and approval, or become indifferent to it. Another possibility is that they may start to mistrust either the message or the messenger, wasting everyone's breath; or they might come to think they're super-clever and special and annoy people with their self-importance, when in truth they're simply normal. Boys in particular can also feel swamped and suffocated by what they can experience as a continuous positive or negative commentary on their every move and are inclined to act out to escape the microscopic attention and constant judgement.

In addition, there is growing concern that over-exposure to praise has led to children being ruined by rewards, dulled by 'dumbing down' and incapacitated by anxiety or, at the very least, easily wrong-footed when faced with real challenges. They may then hide their anxiety with diversionary displays of daring and bravado in other spheres. And there's the worry that boys are being softened by mollycoddling and lack the resilience valued in other societies. For praise to be reliably effective, we have to be careful and understand fully its pros and cons, wider value and the approaches that are safest given boys' particular sensitivities.

This is what this book sets out to achieve. The early chapters (1-6) present the basic principles, tactics and purposes. Chapter One develops an understanding of praise that underpins the thinking behind the 100 tips that are spread equally between the remaining ten chapters. Chapter Four enables readers to reflect upon the important features of child development and so relate the principles and tactics to the age and developmental stage of any

particular boy. The later chapters (7-10) consider the subtleties and potential dangers of praise, and the final one invites the reader to self-reflect. Each tip stands alone and can be dipped into at random, but readers may like to read at least the introduction to each chapter in turn to gain an initial overview. It is a book to revisit on many occasions.

To offer a flavour of what this book will help you to understand, consider the following questions and try to spot the key differences between the possible responses:

When your son does particularly well, which might you say?

- I'm really proud of you for managing that!
- I hope you feel proud of yourself - you should.
- You probably feel really proud to have achieved that.
- I feel so proud of you and proud that you're my child.

If your son gets into the school football team, would you ...?

- Say, Great! How many others tried for how many places?
- Promise to continue the trips to the park to develop his skills further.
- Go as a family to every match to give him support.
- Attend yourself and shout encouragement from the sideline.

When your son tidies his room without being told, would you ...?

- Give him a hug and bring him a hot or cold drink.
- Say thanks, but laugh and say you wonder how long it will last.
- Give him money, and hope this will persuade him to carry on the good work.

- Comment favourably on the improvement and ask what triggered the idea.

... Now read on!



CHAPTER 1

Understanding Praise, and How Boys React to it

Children love praise; of course they do, for most of us thrive on compliments and appreciation. Despite the pleasure it gives, children should be praised for more than just the delight it brings them or that it helps them try harder. Praise needs to be a central part of raising children because praise meets most of their fundamental needs. In other words, it is not merely a bit of luxury, some additional fancy wrapping that we can leave off if we prefer. Children need to feel important and significant to someone, to believe that someone cares enough to cherish them, and this is at least as important as being properly fed and clothed. Children need to feel secure and trust and rely on that care, which they can when they feel valued and central to their carer's life. They also need friendly and warm guidance, support and direction about how they should lead their lives, so they need to hear what it is they should do rather than how they constantly fall short and disappoint. And in order for children to flourish, they need to know and be told they are capable, are enjoyed and give pleasure - particularly to their parents.

Praise tends to be thought of as something spoken, put into words, but we can convey our pleasure, approval and appreciation in many ways. Hugs, smiles, rewards and touches, as we see in Chapter Six, all have their part to play and can sometimes be more effective because they can be more spontaneous and more direct. Even the spoken vocabulary of praise is more varied than at first appears, for the term 'praise' includes many types of phrase and expression that convey appreciation, acknowledgement or

pure delight. The differences are important, as will become clear as the tips are explored.

It is deeply frustrating to realise that not all praise is helpful: just when we thought we were getting it right, people are saying we could be getting it wrong. The good news is that it is not complicated to work out which styles and phrases are likely to support achievement and which sentiments can become confusing or burdensome and could cause problems. Effective relationships are always those that manage to keep a range of needs, styles and goals in balance. The essence of constructive praise is that it is useful and encouraging: it provides relevant detailed information; it is believable so it is neither hollow nor false; and it may also show the way forward. Most important, the recipient should remain in full charge of his progress and be given opportunities to become confident in his ability to judge things for himself.

The energy that enables boys to take advantage of opportunity is self-belief. Self-belief is fuelled when boys genuinely feel capable because they know in detail what it was they did right (which means they know they can do it again), because they have acknowledged the mistakes they made in the past and now know how to avoid them (which means failures have been faced, not ignored) and because they feel certain that they are unconditionally loved and accepted for who they are, not for matching up to someone else's ideal or for something they're especially good at. It is rarely helpful to celebrate every success and ignore every failure. Just as certain types of praise can be unhelpful, criticism can be constructive - when mistakes are acknowledged, identified, ironed out and the necessary adjustments required made clear.

Boys do need to be affirmed and acknowledged as much as girls but given the culture amongst, especially older, boys, for being 'cool', not wanting to be considered a 'swot'

and wishing to achieve without apparently trying, any praise or reward needs to be offered discreetly and with minimum fuss. Boys are not only readily embarrassed by overt praise (whether given in front of others or in private) but they are also more suspicious of it. They are more inclined to feel potentially manipulated by praise and to remain less seduced by it.

When given to older boys, praise needs to be either matter of fact - very descriptive of what has been achieved - or short. Young men tend to clothe themselves in confidence, sometimes to a degree that masks an underlying fear of failure. When boys fail to deliver what's expected, it is often because they have been cavalier about the amount of preparation that was necessary, have cut things too fine and aren't able to perform. In this event, the most useful response is to encourage them to look in detail at what they did not manage so they become clear what they need to do next time. They should not be allowed to hide behind some generalised assertion that it will be okay next time because they'll concentrate better, have a different teacher or start to knuckle down sooner.

Boys need to be overtly valued by adult males, their fathers especially. From the age of about eight, boys begin to dismiss girls and other females and increasingly challenge their mothers and female teachers as they explore their male identity and assert their masculinity. Female approval may become less valued for a while.

Boys of all ages, but particularly younger boys, find it quite hard to concentrate and apply themselves. 'Stickability' is their big weakness. They are very easily bored, diverted and distracted. In order to encourage boys to stay committed and focused, all positive feedback needs to be served up little and often but always discreetly. If we wait until the end of whatever it is they're supposed to be working on, it could be too late.

Boys need to be encouraged to become better organised, to plan ahead and may seem to need incentives and rewards to keep them focused. But being generally more attuned to power, boys are quick to bargain over the rewards offered and can twist them to their advantage. Boys will need to be encouraged and admired for their personal qualities that show caring and sharing, friendship and reliability, not simply for their strength or actions that ensure survival.



CHAPTER 2

The Purpose of Praise

What is praise for? It may seem an unnecessary question to ask but it is important to be clear about what it is we are trying to achieve in order to help us check whether what we say and do is all-round beneficial with no negative side effects. For example, parents of course want to help their sons grow up with good self-esteem. Self-esteem and strong self-belief are, indeed, valuable attributes, but their value is undermined if they come at the expense of sound self-knowledge (because they are told they're wonderful at everything), sound friendships (because friends are put off by the resulting bossiness and arrogance) and determination and perseverance (because they have never had to face and overcome setbacks). Praising certain reactions and behaviour can encourage the development of moral awareness by inviting children to reflect on their own behaviour and how they might change it and by commenting favourably on thoughtfulness; but if piling on praise leads to self-obsession and over-confidence, a boy's awareness of his impact on other people could be dulled. In order to decide whether our affirmative comments and actions are overall helpful, we should acknowledge the full range of possible desirable goals and the different categories and styles of positive feedback.

Here are some terms, all of which begin with the letter A, that help us to focus on the varied, deeper purposes of praise beyond the obvious ones.

Affirm; Appreciate; Approve; Admire; Attend;
Anticipate;

Achieve; Acknowledge; be Aware and Alert; Aspiration

Each of these ten simple objectives is explored as a separate tip in this chapter.

It is useful to consider praise in terms of time zones. Although each encounter and incident is in the present, a key purpose of praise – and of support and encouragement – is to help a boy feel optimistic about his future, comfortable with the route he has travelled from the past, as well as content with the present. When we *encourage* him, our focus is on the future – we try to convince any boy in our care he will overcome any current difficulty to be successful thereafter. We therefore generate faith, hope and confidence and give him heart. When we clearly *enjoy* his company and his achievements, we indicate our happiness and pleasure with who he is, in the present. When we *endorse* his actions, his view of the world, his approaches to learning and his feelings, we are accepting those bits of him that have been fashioned by his past. If boys are comfortable about past behaviour and experiences, even if these were difficult, they are better able to look optimistically at the future. It is not helpful for parents or significant others to make a boy feel either ashamed of or guilty about his past or to wipe it out in any attempt to refocus and start again.

1 Affirm – to help him feel strong

Q: If parents don't praise you directly, how else might you know that they're pleased with you?

A: When they leave me alone and let me get on with things without nagging me. (16)

A: When they give me more responsibility, it shows they trust me. That gives me a buzz and is like praise. (15)

To affirm a child is to make a clear statement that confirms and accepts who he is. The word has its origins in a Latin