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# Raising and Praising Girls

Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

Raising  
*and*  
Praising  
Girls

**Elizabeth Hartley Brewer**

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For Lynette, Rosemary, Rosalind and Hugh.  
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 girls of any age - babies, toddlers and teenagers - and for teachers. Most of the tips cover general principles but several are age-specific and show how our praise style should change as our girls grow. One of the most important lessons we have learnt over the last two to three decades is how much all children 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; and although some still do, most people are now sufficiently familiar and comfortable with the phrases commonly used to hand out 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. Girls and boys, 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, girls 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. Any child can also feel suffocated by a continuous positive or negative commentary on her every move; and may behave outrageously to shake off 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. For praise to be reliably effective, we have to be careful, subtle and understand fully its pros and cons, wider value and the approaches that are safest given girls' particular sensitivities.

This is what this book sets out to achieve. The early chapters (1-6) present the basic principles, tactics and purposes of praise. 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 important features of child development, and so relate the principles and tactics to the age and developmental stage of any girl. The later chapters (7-10) consider the subtleties and potential dangers of praise, and the final one invites readers to self-reflect. Each tip has been written to stand alone and so can be dipped into at random, but

readers may benefit initially from reading consecutively, at least the introduction to each chapter, to gain a sense of the direction and argument. 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 daughter 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 daughter gets into the school swimming team, would you . . . ?**

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

**When your daughter tidies her room without being told, would you . . . ?**

- Give her a hug and bring her a hot or cold drink.
- Say thanks, but laugh and say you wonder how long it will last.
- Give her money, and hope this will persuade her 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 Girls 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 it meets most of their fundamental needs. In other words, praise 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 through to adolescence, so they need to hear what it is they should do rather than how they constantly fall short and disappoint. And in order for a girl to flourish, she needs to know and be told she is capable, is enjoyed and gives pleasure - particularly to her 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 our children difficulty. Effective relationships are always those that manage to keep a range of needs, styles and objectives 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 her progress and be given opportunities to become confident in her ability to judge things for herself.

The energy that enables girls to take advantage of opportunity is self-belief. Self-belief is fuelled when girls feel genuinely 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, for just as certain types of praise can be unhelpful, criticism can be constructive - when mistakes are acknowledged, identified and ironed out girls learn from them.

Girls tend to be more conformist than boys and like to tow the line and receive approval. Most enjoy being 'good', to the extent that girls are the goody goodies and are far

more likely to strive to be teacher's pet. Few boys are ever described as a goody goody. But the danger is that girls have a propensity to do things not because they judge it to be right or helpful but in order to get into or stay in other people's good books. They are therefore far more prey to flattery than boys, more likely to mould themselves on key individuals' expectations and can become cut off from their true selves, which means that they may have fewer opportunities to establish a clear personal identity.

With girls, it is important not to over-emphasise 'good' behaviour. Obedience, diligence, cleanliness and tidiness are certainly easier for parents to live with, but far more than this is required if a child is to become a successful adult. Eating disorder specialists comment frequently on female sufferers' perfectionism, their regular handwriting, their impressive personal organisation, their sensitivity, high standards and achievements and desire to please. Yet this success often masks a deeper discontent and doubt directed at the self. What girls need in today's competitive world is the ability to stand up for themselves, to explore, be creative and to take risks, which raises the likelihood of mistakes and mess. Praise needs to boost a girl's inner confidence - her underlying capability and her capacity to judge for herself - rather than highlight effort and outcomes that have been defined as desirable by someone else. When girls become 'clones' and model themselves on an idealised image to get approval, it can mean that they fear failure.

Girls enjoy pleasing adults and respect success in others, so they remain happy to receive praise publicly. Achievements may encourage others to greater effort but some may become bitchy to offset the envy they feel. Nonetheless, those who do well often remain convinced it was a fluke, not due to their talent. They need to be given

details about what they did right and told that it is absolutely okay to make mistakes and fail sometimes.



## 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 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 daughters grow up with good self-esteem to confound the age-old assumption that women do not or cannot make it to the top. Self-esteem and strong self-belief are, indeed, valuable attributes. Nonetheless, 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 interfering bossiness) and determination and perseverance because girls are always shielded from challenges and setbacks. Praising certain reactions and behaviour, such as thoughtfulness, can help to develop moral awareness, and children can be encouraged to notice their effect on other people. But if piling on praise leads to self-obsession and over-confidence, a girl's awareness of her 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 our daughters or the girls in our charge feel optimistic about their future, comfortable with the route they have travelled from the past, as well as content with the present. When we *encourage* them, our focus is on the future - we try to convince any girl she will overcome any current difficulty to be successful thereafter. We therefore generate faith, hope and confidence and give her heart. When we clearly *enjoy* her company and achievements, we indicate our happiness and pleasure with who she is, in the present. When we *endorse* her actions, her view of the world, her approaches to learning and her feelings, we are accepting those bits of her that have been fashioned by her past.

If girls are comfortable about their 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 girl feel either ashamed of or guilty about her past or to wipe it out in any attempt to refocus and start again.

# 1 Affirm - to help her feel strong

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

*A: You can tell by their face, which shows they're proud. (8)*

*A: When she smiles at you, you kind of know. It makes me feel proud of myself. (9)*

To affirm a child is to make a clear statement that confirms and accepts her as she is. The word has its origins in a Latin word that means 'strong'. It therefore implies strength. When we affirm a child, we offer a firm statement of strong support, but it also gives children strength when they hear it.

To affirm is to make a neutral, judgement-free statement. Its essence is descriptive. An affirmation is powerful and valuable because it is able to encompass the past, present and future - to endorse and encourage. We do not have to wait for any particular event or achievement to speak out. We can help our daughter to understand who she is at any time by describing what we see - her qualities and personality, likes and dislikes, particular talents - and then confirm how much we enjoy and love her as she is.

## ***Parents***

- think of ways to describe how she thinks and does things that will 'firm her up', make her

## ***Teachers***

- 'I like your ideas and what you are trying to say. They'd be clearer and more powerful if you separated them out. Try

feel confident and strong inside:

- 'I love the way your eyes crinkle at the edges when you laugh'

- 'I've noticed how well you organised everyone to . . . , which makes me think you're . . . responsible enough to go into town with friends at the weekend'

- Ask her to help you with tasks either because she is good company or because she's good at that sort of thing

writing each idea down and thinking how they link to the rest'

- 'of course you will feel cross that Carl is using the computer before you, but alphabetical order is what the class agreed'

## 2 Appreciate her achievements

*You need to believe you can do it. (10)*

For a young child, every day brings fresh challenges and fresh achievements. One day she can't do something, yet the next she can. Life is a growing experience in which each day more becomes manageable so competence can blossom. These achievements become the expression of being and it is essential that they are fully appreciated.

One of the meanings of 'appreciate' is, be sensitive to. That is a significant definition. It suggests we should be sufficiently sensitive to see things on her level and in her terms: in relation to her challenges and difficulties, her limitations and capabilities, not our expectations.

'Appreciation' also covers the notion of value increasing, as in the value of houses or other forms of saving. Each child can be viewed as our most valuable asset. She will see that she goes up in your estimation each time you appreciate her and what she has managed to achieve. Of course you love her too, and she remains as important to you as ever, but every child really flies if she feels that those on whom she relies and whom she loves to the bottom of her being believe she has the potential to develop and impress.

### ***Parents***

- 'achievement' can be very widely interpreted: any advance in reading level, sociability, maths,

### ***Teachers***

- many schools have reward systems that acknowledge achievement for each

height and reach, ball skills, being able to dress unaided, confidence, learning to swim, pack bags for school or an overnight with a friend, can be openly appreciated

- appreciation energises - when girls hear your appreciation they feel able to move forward. Those who receive little can get emotionally and developmentally stuck and become demoralised

individual, rather than what is exceptional for the group

- appreciate a wide variety of skills and knowledge, not simply those related to academic learning on which most lessons concentrate
- appreciate, in other words be sensitive to, each child's vulnerabilities. Some may need to hear it more frequently

### 3 Approve of who she is

*When I get praise, it makes me feel special. (8)*

Approval is the green light to grow, to carry on in the same way because she is good and lovely and fine as she is. Girls need this not only from their mothers, but also - as they enter their pre-teens - from their fathers if this is feasible. As soon as girls start to fashion their individual identity around being female, from about the age of eight, they benefit from having a mature male who will not just approve of her but also show profound respect for her as she explores ideas of gender differences, different styles of relationship with the opposite sex she might expect and what being female might mean for her. Male friends, uncles or cousins or a friendly neighbour may be able to step in where a father is not available. In any case, mothers should be careful not to disparage men in general because girls need to be able to explore relationships with the opposite sex confidently.

But gender is only one aspect of her identity - one of the later spoonfuls of colour added to her personality palette. She is already an individual and she needs to feel approved of for all her strengths, weaknesses, fears, habits and eccentricities.

#### ***Parents***

- hear her side of the story - assume the best of her, not the worst

#### ***Teachers***

- avoid stereotyping - each girl is an individual, not a replica of anyone, even an older sibling

- let her tell you about her disappointments and realise what they mean to her

- respect her ideas - of what to play or wear; her methods - how to study; and her preferences when these are important

- listen to what she has to say, keeping your opinions to yourself unless she asks for them

- acknowledge that each student's point of view will be the result of her unique experiences over the years

- accept that different children learn in different ways and be tolerant of each one's preferred style