

Avoiding the “Good Job!” Habit

By Diane Cullinane, M.D.

“Good job!” is a phrase used frequently during treatment sessions with autistic children. What message does a child receive from hearing, “Good Job!”? We hope they hear our interest, encouragement and approval. However, when “Good Job!” becomes a habit, is it still successful in conveying this meaning? Or, does it simply signal that the adult is in control, with specific goals in mind and is directing the child towards those behaviors, regardless of the child’s intention? Can frequent “Good Job!” responses undermine a child’s initiative, creativity and broader learning? Does it interfere with a more robust engagement?

Use of “Good Job!” in a behavioral approach vs. a developmental approach

In a behavioral style of teaching, a child is given instructions, and is then provided with a verbal reward such as ‘Good Job!’ for following a specific command. The adult is clearly the authority and directs the child’s learning. A behavioral approach is based on the idea that a child with special needs requires specific adult direction and rewards in order to learn.

By contrast, in a developmental framework, an adult seeks to form a warm and trusting relationship with a child and encourages rather than directs a child’s learning. In this approach, the adult places a high value on each child’s individual interests and preferences. Learning takes place through play and semi-structured activities, with a goal of not only accomplishing specific learning objectives, but also advancing developmental capacities for two-way communication and reflective thinking.

In the developmental approach there is a natural flow of communication which transforms as a child reaches higher developmental capacities. Children are encouraged to introduce their own ideas, consider others’ perspectives and form opinions. A developmental framework is based on the premise that each child possesses a natural desire to explore, learn and master new skills, including children with autism. In this approach, a “Good Job!” declaration is largely irrelevant and moreover interferes with a dynamic multi-layered social interaction.

Is direct teaching necessary?

Moments of direct instruction may be useful to teach a specific skill, but this is only required for a small fraction of any child’s day. This teaching will be successful if done in the context of an established warm rapport between adult and child, and when the child already has a strong capacity for shared attention, reciprocity and intentionality. Then, a series of affective exchanges, culminating in a genuine and confirmatory, “Yes! You did it!” or “You’re right!” can provide valuable feedback, recognize their success, and reflect their pride in accomplishment.

Is there any harm in saying, “Good Job!”?

Alfie Kohn, in his landmark book, Punished by Rewards*, documents extensive research showing the unintended negative consequences of the use of praise and rewards to influence behavior. Building on those findings, here are 10 reasons to avoid the “Good Job!” habit, and 12 alternatives to enrich your interactions.

* Kohn, Alfie. (1993/1999/2018). Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

10 reasons NOT to say: “Good Job!”

1. “Good Job!” has limited emotional meaning and constricts the complexity of interaction possible. A child may tune out “Good job!” as no more than background noise or may be bothered or confused and turn away.
2. “Good job!” places judgement on specific actions and discourages a child’s initiative, creativity and experimentation.
3. “Good Job!” values an action, whether purposeful or not, so that the child does not have time to evaluate their act and its outcome for themselves, and form concepts that can be applied more generally.
4. “Good Job!” creates a relationship of dominance and control, rather than a relationship with shared pleasure, reciprocity, a natural flow of communication and co-regulation. A child may feel resentful when their interests, choices and feelings are ignored.
5. A child may wait passively for instructions and then rush to completion in anticipation of “Good Job!” and other rewards. Later in life, they may be vulnerable to coercion.
6. After hearing “Good Job!” a child may repeat the praised actions rather than planning and challenging themselves in a new effort, thus missing the potential of feeling pride in accomplishing their own, more difficult goal.
7. “Good Job!” given after obedience that ends a challenging behavior may not address the underlying reason for a child’s distress. Without deeper understanding and resolution, the original problem will likely emerge in another undesirable behavior.
8. Some children learn to manipulate interactions to gain more frequent responses of “Good Job!” or alternatively learn to purposefully frustrate or deceive the adult.
9. When an adult directs actions punctuated with “Good Job!”, a child fails to develop the capacity for collaborative shared problem solving, understanding perspective of others, and considering others’ experiences with empathy.
10. With constant directives, a child may fail to develop a true sense of their own identity, wishes, interests and needs. As an adult, they may then lack the capacity to advocate for themselves.

12 things to say (and do) instead of saying “Good job!”

1. Don’t say anything! Join a child’s play with your actions, expanding their activity by building on their interests.
2. Offer a range of different emotional expressions and gestures that clarify and deepen meaning for the child and create a shared affective experience: surprise (Oh!), frustration (Ugh!; Grr!),

disappointment (Ah!), delight (Ha!), sadness (Umm), confusion (Hm?), concern (Aye..), disgust (Eww. Uck!) etc.

3. Give informational comments and observations: "You are making it so tall!" "It keeps falling over- ah!" "You hit it so hard that the ball went over the fence!" "Oh! That little ball got stuck." "You are working really hard to make that stand up."
4. Use sounds and gestures to encourage a child to sustain focus and effort, "Push!!" "You can do it!" or to calm and overly excited child: deep breath and a calming, "Whoa. That was fun!"
5. Help define the meaning of actions: "I see you are sitting.. that tells me that you are ready." "You're looking at the ball, does that mean you want to play catch?"
6. Notice patterns: "The red king always gets the prize!" "Each time I win, you want to change the rules."
7. Ask questions using gestures and words: Where? What? When? Who? Now or later? Which one? How far? How fast? How many? The big one or the little one? Is that what you wanted? Is that what you expected? Do you remember...?
8. Offer your own ideas, perspective, opinions and feelings: "I think.." "I like.." "I don't want.." "That makes me..." "I'm worried that.." "How about if we..?"
9. Offer help: "The blue one you need is over there." "Do you want help to go faster?" "You can ask for help to open it if you want."
10. Explain problems, solicit ideas and give choices, "You both want the same one. I wonder what would make it fair?" "Should we try x or y?"
11. Give surprise, non-contingent praise: "It was fun playing with you." "You have good ideas!"
12. Express genuine thanks and appreciation: "Thanks for helping to clean up"; "Thank you for waiting for me."

By avoiding the "Good Job!" habit and engaging in a richer interaction, a child will expand their capacities for thinking and communicating at more complex levels and an adult and child will enjoy a mutually rewarding relationship.

Diane Cullinane, M.D., April 17, 2020

Author of Behavioral challenges in children with autism and other special needs: The developmental approach (2016). W.W.Norton & Co. Contact: dacullinane@gmail.com