
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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USING ENCOURAGEMENT WITH TRAINING PARTICIPANTS

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To help others believe in themselves is one of a leader's highest duties. ~ John Gardner

INTRODUCTION

Evidence in the field of early childhood supports the shift from the typical use of praise to the use of encouragement and its positive impact on young children. Adult learners also have a strong need for meaningful feedback in a safe learning environment. Using the language of encouragement with adults has been shown to meet this need in typical adult learning settings including workshops, courses, and on the job.

Trainers and other educators have many opportunities to provide encouragement to support participant learning during training and in follow-up activities. In each case, trainers must continually make an effort to give meaningful, authentic encouragement that, in turn, serves as a model for appropriate practice with young children. The ability to provide appropriate encouragement—both written and verbal—promotes participant ownership of the learning process and leads to comfortable, more productive learning experiences.

Most early childhood trainers and educators have been raised using the language of praise to give feedback. Because of this, it may take significant effort and commitment to shift to using the language of encouragement. But it is encouragement that results in truly positive support. Trainers must learn to avoid inappropriate use of pat phrases and meaningless words of praise in favor of using words and phrases that recognize individual progress, strengths, specific accomplishments, and effort at any level. The use of encouragement a) gives helpful information to the learner specific to their performance and b) serves to launch learners toward improvement of particular practices and skills through self-evaluation.

THE CASE AGAINST USING PRAISE

"Wow," "super," "great," "grade A work," and the ever popular "good job" are frequently used words of praise. These words do little to help adult learners understand why their comment or written work is so great. When they do not understand what they have accomplished to warrant the facilitator's praise, they are stuck with guessing which aspects of their behavior to continue to use. Although these words are considered positive, many learning facilitators overuse praise words or phrases (written and verbal), making them almost meaningless as a regular method of feedback.

Besides frequent use rendering them meaningless, these types of words are judgmental, providing a superficial judgment at best. Though it is seldom admitted, praise is also often used in group training situations to promote compliance and subtly coerce others to engage in the same activity or discussion as the person who is being publicly—and sometimes loudly—praised.

~ Praise is ineffective for giving meaningful support for learning. Both praise and encouragement are intended to focus more on appropriate and less on inappropriate comments or participation. It is also hoped that this will facilitate confidence and self-esteem in adult learners. These are important goals for trainers, but it has been shown that praise alone does not actually meet these goals. Furthermore, praise can have a particularly detrimental effect in the long-term on self-esteem. Repeated praise can create dependence on outside feedback and promote a learner's desire to "appear" intelligent and "perfect" in order to generate additional praise.

Generally, rewards do encourage predictable behavior but, in the long run, may kill the intrinsic joy of learning. ~ P. Schiller

~ **Praise often consists of making a judgment.** Praise is simply one person's judgment of another person's performance. Without definitive criteria or context, praise does nothing to help individuals learn the skills of self-evaluation or develop the internal resources most likely to enhance their own self-esteem.

To many of us, praise seems like such a good, positive way to get children [and adults] to behave. It's a way to make them feel good about themselves so they'll try harder to do what they should. We congratulate ourselves that we have abandoned the use of criticism in exchange for teaching with praise. What we fail to see is that praise is simply the positive face of criticism, that both presume the right of one person to impose judgment on another. ~ Kathleen Grey

~ **Praise is impersonal and often given publicly.** Praise is often given publicly and, for some reason, loudly and with enthusiasm. If a person says "You're the best!" to almost everyone who answers a question or completes a task, it eventually becomes obvious that being "the best" has no real meaning no matter how loud or excitedly it is exclaimed!

Praise is sometimes used by trainers as public proof that they are paying attention to what participants are doing and to encourage further participation. With the best of intentions, they walk around the group dropping the phrase "good job" here and there with the hope that this attention will spur other participants into doing a good job (whatever that means). However, praise such as this ultimately begins to sound superficial and impersonal and definitely does not provide any meaningful feedback on participation in the discussion or completion of assigned activities.

~ **Praise is often used as coercion.** Descriptive praise like "Wow, Ben! Your group came up with ten ideas to list on the flip chart" does give information about what the group did. But this type of praise is arbitrary at best and is often given in an attempt to coerce others

to follow suit. While this feedback may or may not end up being effective, it tends to create an unproductive climate of competition ("Wait a minute! My group worked hard to develop quality ideas. No one said we were supposed to list a certain number!"). When overused, this type of added description becomes insignificant as well.

In my own teaching, both with children and adults, I don't use praise words very much any more. They often sound manipulative and insincere, even when I use them judiciously. And there are times when I don't like receiving praise for exactly the same reason. ~ Kathleen Grey

Meaningful learning begs for specific and meaningful feedback in direct response to the knowledge and skills being taught. Because praise does not provide meaningful support for participants in training, it could be almost considered a waste of time. A productive training session provides a nurturing and responsive environment—an incubator, no less—for growth and development. Instead, much training has become what some educators describe as a meaningless exercise in stroking participants' egos. This is often done in an attempt to help them "feel good about themselves" and the training experience, with little emphasis on genuine growth and learning.

THE CASE FOR USING ENCOURAGEMENT

The components of positive feedback are embodied in the language of encouragement. Encouragement is a way of interacting with others that gives them meaningful input about their participation, practical ways to reflect and evaluate their own progress, and support for continuing their efforts. And the directed comments are delivered using a natural tone of voice!

The use of encouragement reflects the belief that everyone has strengths, that everyone has an inherent desire to learn, and that everyone benefits from respectful interactions with trainers and others to help them acquire confidence and develop their emerging knowledge and skills. Encouragement has a long lasting effect and the words and phrases used frequently come to participants' minds long after the training session has ended.

Students benefit from encouragement when they are frustrated, unable to move on, working at peak effort, taking on a risk, or feeling limited in some way. ~ Performance Learning Systems

~ **Encouragement is effective for giving meaningful and positive feedback.** Encouragement is always descriptive of what has been observed. When you say to a small group, "You all have made quite a list," the feedback relates specifically to their work on the task you gave them. When you quietly say to an individual, "Your comments tell me you find value in looking at issues from the parent perspective," the feedback encourages the basic practice of parent partnerships and reinforces the individual's strength in this area. Depending on the learning situation, you might add another comment to challenge the individual's thinking further, such as "You clearly understand this and are ready for the next step; how would looking at the issue from the parent perspective make a difference in your response to the scenario just described?"

~ **Encouragement promotes self-evaluation and is not external judgment by others.** When you stop critiquing participants' efforts and let them critique themselves with your encouragement, you place responsibility for evaluating the experience and judgment about the impact of their participation directly on the learners. You really cannot make people learn anyway, no matter how many "bravos" you drop on them! But you can promote evaluation of the learning experience in ways that help learners take ownership. The experience then becomes more about meeting participants' personal learning goals in a nurturing and collaborative environment than about meeting your goals, although hopefully they intersect in some way.

It can be very freeing for trainers and other educators to understand that the learner is always in charge of his or her own learning and responsible for the amount of energy invested in the learning process. Your sizeable responsibility is to provide meaningful opportunities for learning based on your best knowledge and assessment. During those well planned learning opportunities, you then offer encouragement and positive feedback as participants take advantage of the activities you have planned to help them develop their individual knowledge and skills. Certainly there is a time for applause and

cheers of approval, but this type of cheerleading needs to be heavily outweighed by positive feedback for real growth—and attempts at growth—to take place.

Using encouragement provides tools for individuals to evaluate their own behavior with young children. When you quietly say to an individual, "You are developing quite a repertoire of ways to respond when a child bites," you recognize that they have useful knowledge. This type of positive support is likely to be internalized to the point that the individual will eventually say to herself, "I know quite a few ways to respond when a child bites."

~ **Encouragement is genuine, personal, and often private.** While you can encourage a whole group with comments such as "This group has engaged in exploration and discovery beyond my expectations," the power of encouragement lies in its being personal. When you deliver encouraging statements privately, you show respect for the uniqueness of each individual. To maintain privacy, comments do not always have to be given verbally; they can be written on sticky notes, or penned on the edge of the page of a written activity.

It is important to watch for genuine opportunities to use encouragement. It is not a contest of "how much feedback can you give" but of "how meaningful is the feedback." When a participant's face shines with "I never imagined I would be able to do this" (sometimes actually saying it aloud), you can share the moment by smiling and saying nothing or quietly acknowledging their accomplishment by saying, "Look what you did!"

~ **Encouragement is never used to coerce.** Encouragement is never given in an attempt to coerce a person to mimic another's behavior; it is most often a private exchange between you and the individual. Encouragement is a strategy that respects and builds upon each participant's ability to develop lifelong skills to acquire self-confidence and positive self-direction. When you use encouragement, you will begin to notice that participants start to use encouragement with one another. Instead of competing for "A grades" and your congratulations, learners become supporters of their own and each others' learning.

STRATEGIES FOR USING ENCOURAGEMENT

The following list describes key areas where encouragement is likely to have the most impact. Thinking about

these areas can help you in your shift to using the language of encouragement. You are using encouragement when you focus on a participant's interests, learning process, efforts, accomplishments, feelings, progress, and self-evaluation.

~ **Interests** Allow participants to talk about their interests and promote exploration that relates to those interests. Learning is quite tedious when a person is disinterested. By encouraging learners to explore concepts in the context of their own personal interests, you tap into their inner desire to learn. For example, what do you think might happen if you said, "I would like to hear about your favorite part of being a teacher/caregiver?"

~ **Learning Process** Acknowledge the learning process instead of focusing on the result. You might say, "I congratulate you for stepping out of your comfort zone and trying out this new idea." Encourage training participants to communicate about their learning process rather than your guessing what a participant's comment means or work represents. You might say, "If you had completed this observation a year ago, would it have looked the same or different?"

~ **Efforts** Comment about a training participant's efforts rather than about a product or behavior. This encourages a focus on the process and the effort that went into the process, rather than on the product. You might say, "You are working hard to use child-first language when you talk about children with disabilities."

~ **Accomplishments** Recognize and point out participants' accomplishments. Help participants develop the disposition to learn and challenge themselves rather than conditioning them to work for praise from you or others. You might say, "Congratulations on your conference proposal being accepted! You have so much to share with other providers."

~ **Feelings** Allow participants to explore/own their actions and feelings instead of asking them to use certain behaviors simply to please you. You might say, "I'd like to know whether you found that activity to be difficult or mostly review."

~ **Progress** Help training participants recognize and monitor their own progress rather than speaking continuously for them. Focusing on progress helps participants see their learning over time and recognize self-growth. You might say, "I appreciate your candid question about including children with AIDS/HIV. As the session continues, I look forward to your continued self-reflection and thoughts on this issue."

~ **Self-evaluation** Model and promote self-evaluation skills instead of your deciding when they have done a "good" or "poor" job. You might say, "I notice you have the ability to do an honest appraisal of yourself and your program." Promoting self-evaluation provides participants with the opportunity to evaluate their own behavior and promotes the development of self-esteem. You might say, "Take a few moments to see if you met your learning goals during this training tonight."

Positive body language such as leaning closer to listen or giving a thumbs-up sign, and facial expressions such as a wink, a smile, or a look of surprise may also be used to provide encouragement as well.

ENCOURAGEMENT PROMOTES LIFELONG SKILLS

Many individuals come to training sessions having learned to depend on praise. Your use of encouragement can help move these individuals from external to internal sources of self-evaluation—lifelong skills for developing and maintaining healthy self-esteem and self-control. These internal skills include:

~ Positive self-evaluation and the ability to confidently say things such as "I like the way I handled that parent's questions about my program."

~ The disposition to keep trying when faced with difficult tasks. This might result in thoughts such as "This learning center is not being used; I need to think of another way to arrange these materials."

~ Understanding of consequences and the connection to behavior. The self-acknowledgment that "When I forget to check in with Jason's parents regularly, I don't have the information I need to include Jason in activities," identifies the means for action.

~ Acceptance of mistakes as part of the learning process. Comments such as "It's all right that I am so slow learning sign language; the more I practice, the

better I get" indicate recognition that learning takes time and personal effort.

CONCLUSION

Praise will always have its place, but it's when there is a balance of types of feedback that true learning takes place during training. Encouragement tends to start conversations and deepen exploration of concepts, while praise often seems to be the last word and a superficial word at best. In many cases, encouragement can build upon praise by skillfully adding descriptive phrases to the automatic and nondescript exclamations you may have become accustomed to using.

Encouragement is truly empowering and highly motivational. Once you routinely use encouragement to support participants as they learn, you will discover its power to boost their spirits and send them home with the desire to do more than you—or they—expected. ~

RESOURCES*

* "Caution—Praise Can Be Dangerous" by C.S. Dweck in *American Educator*, Spring 1999. This article provides a framework for using praise wisely. Particularly, the case is made for praising efforts to succeed and strategies used rather than praising intelligence.

* Encouragement as a Motivating Force by Performance Learning Systems can be found at the following website www.plsweb.com/resources/articles/coaching/1997/05/21/encouragement. The Heart of Teaching Issue #78 is a brief article describing three aspects of encouragement: nonjudgmental approval, encouragement response, and feedforward (which is offered during attempts at learning) rather than feedback which is typically offered after learning is accomplished.

* "Not in Praise of Praise" by Kathleen Grey in *Child Care Exchange*, July/August 1995 shares her experience with using praise in the classroom.

* "Praise or Encouragement: Rewards and Praise and the Brain" by P. Schiller (1999) in *Start Smart! Building Brain Power in the Early Years*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House. This chapter examines encouragement in terms of brain development and suggests that praise can distract children from discovering the internal joy of learning.

* Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, Q's, Praise, and Other Bribes by Alfie Kohn (1993). Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin Company. This book explores the belief that using rewards to motivate or change behavior is ineffective over time. Chapter 6 provides a thought-provoking comparison of encouragement and praise.

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If you have stories to share about implementing the ideas described in this issue, please address your comments to your training colleagues at trainerdirectoryexchange@listserv.montana.edu. If you have comments about the topic of this newsletter or ideas for topics to address in future issues, please contact:

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