

'Praise and criticism'

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Introduction - Praise and Criticism for different age groups

Praise and criticism are two forms of feedback which we give to our students. This feedback not only contains advice but also carries a very strong emotional message.

Learners receive praise and criticism in different ways according to their maturity. Young children need vast quantities of praise and find it difficult to accept criticism.

This is because they cannot separate comments on their work with personal comments. So, 'I don't like your picture' is understood as 'I don't like you'. Similarly, 'I like your picture' is received as 'I like you'.

For this reason, young children need a great deal of praise and encouragement and we need to be very careful with delivering criticism.

The maturity to accept positive criticism is not achieved until adolescents become adults. (Although we all know adults who find it difficult to accept criticism!)

Role - theory

We encourage children to develop positive patterns of behaviour by giving them praise. However, criticism of children does not always discourage bad behaviour because children adopt the 'role' of being the 'naughty', 'stupid', 'slow' or 'clever' child.

Children are constantly searching for a personal identity. They want to get attention from adults. They hate to be ignored. A child who is regularly criticised for bad behaviour will adopt the 'role' of being a 'naughty' child. They will be happy in this 'role' and will search for any opportunity to be naughty.

A child can feel happy in the role of 'naughty child' because naughtiness makes them get attention from the teacher. Even if this attention is in the form of criticism, it is better than no attention at all.

Children accept many different roles. We all know 'the class clown'. The class clown is a child who has developed a reputation for making jokes and doing silly things in order to gain attention from others.

Praise and criticism with teenagers - who is giving the praise?

As adults, we receive praise from many different sources. The value we put on the praise depends on who gives you the praise. So, a few words of praise from a person you respect highly is worth much more than more lavish praise received from someone you do not respect so much.

Young children have a great deal of respect for their teachers so they place a great value on the praise they receive from teachers. Like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis a young teenager is trying to take off the baby skin to emerge as an adult. Part of becoming an adult is rejecting childish dependency on all adults (parents, teachers, etc.)

For this reason, young teenagers often reject 'friendliness' from teachers. They are frightened of being seen by their age-group as 'teacher's pets'. A 'teacher's pet' is seen (by other teenagers) as being rather immature because they still value adult praise in the same way as young children do.

Do teenagers need praise?

Teenagers still need praise from adults but the praise should be less intense and given less frequently. Praise should not be concentrated on some students because they may be perceived to be 'teachers' pet'. All students need some praise but we should be careful of over-praising individuals.

Can teenagers take criticism?

In general teenagers find it very difficult to accept criticism. In rejecting the content of the criticism, they also reject the person who criticised them. Public criticism is particularly damaging and is likely to produce the reverse of the desired result.

Criticism and correction

Correction can often be interpreted as criticism so we often combine praise with correction. 'Yes, thank you, that's good but it would be even better if...'

Conclusions

Praise is much more effective in guiding behaviour than criticism. If you are teaching young teenagers in the 11-14 or 12-15 age group, your students will start by requiring the high levels of praise and confidence-building which is the characteristic of children. Later, you have to restrict your level of praise given to individuals (particularly in public) for the reasons discussed above. Try to praise before you correct. Try to avoid all negative criticism.