

# Hecht: Careful with the compliments

Pam J. Hecht, Special to WNC Parent Published 5:00 a.m. ET Feb. 19, 2020

"Mom, how can you say that?" my son said, eyes wide in horror when I agreed with him that, yes, his Lego house was a bit lopsided. "What about my self-esteem?"

Apparently, coming off a steady diet of "good job, nice work and well done," for things like painting a brown clump, had taken its toll. Also, all of those "yays" and hand clapping had to go — I was giving myself a headache.

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"I'm done with all the lies, sweetie," I said, patting my innocent 6-year-old on the back. "The jig is up."

I never was cheerleader material anyway. Who can keep up all that positivity, not to mention the pompoms, in the air that long?

As it turns out, rather than needing a round-the-clock cheering squad, kids build confidence by the simple act of succeeding (or improving) at something, particularly if it's a struggle. Our job, experts say, is to encourage them along, by focusing praise on things kids can control: effort and perseverance.

## How to keep your plaudits in check

Here are a few tips to keep excessive praise to a minimum so that your children do not turn into unhappy, insecure, entitled little (or big) monsters:

1. You may think your child is the most clever creature on earth, but don't tell her that. She'll have a six-hour tantrum when she can't solve a math problem in two seconds and will also think you're a big, fat liar.
2. It's fine to admire a child's talent at times, but piling it on can turn a kid into an addict craving praise like it's crack. Save the rave until they've really earned it.
3. When you're at your child's piano recital, hold off on the standing ovation, wildly screaming, "What an artistic genius! Such talent! He got some of that from me!" Instead, duck into a restroom to calm (the kudos) down. Ask your miniature Mozart if he enjoyed playing on the stage and congratulate him for not puking.
4. Try not to tell your child, "Nice throwing arm you have there," when she hurls her hot dog bun at the waiter, even if she hits him in the ear and yells, "bull's-eye." Display appropriate disapproval, but quietly sign her up for little league softball. Or perhaps, invest in a family dart set.
5. If you feel yourself starting to break out into a Broadway-style musical number about a "brilliant" poem your child wrote, count to ten then point out a line or two that honestly evoked an image or feeling. Save the singing for later, in the shower.
6. If your kid does something cool, ask her how the heck she did it. If she messes up and you're itching to say something nice, acknowledge her effort and ask how she'll tackle things differently next time. Say, 'You'll get it right,' unless she's trying to time travel.
7. Don't hire a marching band to celebrate your child acing a spelling test (or graduating from high school, for that matter. Either way, it's a little much.) A simple, 'you must be proud' or 'studying sure paid off' will do.

The bottom line: Kids need our support but they don't need us to gush about their greatness. Leave all of that exuberance to the cheerleaders.

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