

FREE FIRST STEP TO
TRANSFORMING FAMILY LIFE

CALMER



EASIER

HAPPY

PARENTING

Descriptive Praise

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Introduction

Thank you for seeking out this resource.

I've been working with children, parents, families and schools for more than half a century as a teacher, head teacher, trainer, mentor and parenting advisor. Over the years I've put together a comprehensive package of all the techniques, skills, strategies and principles that I could see work to bring out the best in children and to improve family life. I call this method 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting', and I explain the skills and strategies of this approach in my book of the same name.

Parents always tell me that their biggest frustration is having to repeat instructions numerous times before their children listen and cooperate. *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting* gives you a step-by-step method to solve this problem (and many other typical family problems). Using positive and respectful techniques, parents can guide children into the habit of cooperating the first time and without a fuss - most of the time.

In the many years that I have been consulting with parents, I have never seen these techniques fail. Every family can make the transformation from a typically stressed household to a calmer, easier, happier household. It's never too late, even if your children are already teenagers.

This free e-book (which is extracted from my *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting* book) describes in detail the strategy called Descriptive Praise.

Descriptive Praise is the first strategy I always teach to parents because it is so effective at motivating children and teens to do their best and to be their best.

As you read through this e-book you will see that the parenting issues I address are relevant for all ages: toddlers, younger children, pre-teens and teens.

It gives me great pleasure to offer this first strategy to you now, which I hope gives you a glimpse of what can be achieved.

What makes modern parenting so stressful, and what we can do about it

Changing frustration to freedom

I used to regularly shout at my children around bedtime. And, like clockwork, as soon as they were finally asleep, I would slump onto the sofa, almost in tears, so frustrated and feeling bad about myself. It happened so many evenings. I would vow to be more patient and calm. What I didn't realise back then was that I didn't have a clue how to get them to do what I asked. So I was making a vow that I just couldn't keep.

Now I have the tools so my children do cooperate most of the time. Life is calmer. I'm not spending time bargaining, negotiating and shouting, and I actually have time to get some of the things done that I need to do!

Mother of three, aged 9, 7 and 4

Many of us are juggling work, children's schedules, volunteer commitments, managing household chores, etc. We have an agenda, and we're constantly looking ahead to see what needs to get done. When our kids aren't listening or doing what we ask, it is incredibly frustrating. We find ourselves losing patience and feeling stressed because of all the hassle – the repeating, reminding, negotiating and shouting we think we have to do to get our kids to do all the things that need to be done each day!

Does this sound familiar? It may be that you are at your wits' end from dealing with whingeing, defiance, tantrums and disrespect or with mealtime, bedtime or homework battles. It may be that one of your children has a more extreme temperament – more sensitive, more intense and more inflexible – and you are at a loss as to how to parent this child. Or it may be that the problems you are dealing with are quite mild, and you just want to learn positive and effective strategies to help you to be the best parent you can be. Maybe your child has a diagnosed special need and you want to know how to bring out the best in him.

Given the challenges facing modern parents, it is no wonder that we feel so stressed and are driven to nagging, threatening, criticising and shouting to try to make sure everything gets done that needs to get done every day. It's unlikely that any of these stressors will be going away, so it's up to us to look for ways to reduce family stress and to guide our children to become more cooperative so that parenting can be calmer, easier and happier.

In my book, *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting*, I give you specific strategies and skills to significantly improve cooperation and all the other habits that you want your child to develop. I share with you ways to make the job of parenting calmer, easier and happier.

Lack of cooperation is very stressful!

Parents generally show up at my seminars desperate for more effective ways to reduce misbehaviour and to improve listening and cooperation. Parents may realise that what they are doing isn't working, but they are not sure how to get their kids to do what they are told.

A lack of cooperation can make us feel so frustrated about these little human beings that we couldn't wait to bring into the world. Does our frustration mean that we love them any less? No. But liking our children and wanting to be with them are equally important, and it's no fun spending time with an uncooperative child.

The good news is that there are many simple and effective tools you can quickly learn that will help you develop cooperative children – at all ages. When you practise these techniques consistently, you can move from repeating and reminding and shouting to never having to ask twice, and you can achieve this miraculous transformation in a remarkably short period of time.

A tale of two boys

Let's look at two very different snapshots of what mornings were like for a five-year-old boy named Jimmy.

The first scenario illustrates what can happen when a child isn't yet in the habit of doing what he's asked to do in the mornings. The second scenario shows what mornings can be like for this same boy after his parents have been putting into practice the 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting' skills.

Of course, Jimmy's mother loves him very much in both the before and after versions and, of course, she's doing the best she can to try to get him into good habits. In the first scenario, she simply didn't realise that the way she was reacting was contributing to Jimmy's dawdling and to his uncooperative behaviour. Once this mother learned more effective strategies and started doing things differently, she saw that she could communicate in a way that makes Jimmy feel good and helps him want to do the right thing.

Uncooperative Jimmy's bad morning:

'Jimmy! You're still in bed? It's time to get up – we're going to be late for school!'

Ten minutes later his mother goes back into his room. He has his socks on and nothing else. 'You've been up for ten minutes and you only have your socks on? What have you been doing all this time? You've got to hurry now, and don't forget to make your bed.'

Five minutes later his mother returns, and by now Jimmy's got his underwear on, but he's playing with his toy cars. Her frustration grows. 'You're playing with your cars? You know this is getting dressed time, not playing time.' 'But Mum, I never get to play!'

Jimmy's mother starts helping to dress him because it's faster and she's worried about being late. She gives up on the idea of his bed getting made today.

Jimmy comes into the kitchen and sits down to eat his breakfast. He gets up from the table several times during breakfast to play with the dog, to find a toy and to tease his little sister.

'Jimmy, sit down and eat. If you get up from the table one more time, breakfast is over.' Jimmy gets up again. 'Jimmy, I mean it.' Jimmy gets up

again. 'OK, that's the last warning. If you get up again, I'll take away your TV time after school.'

Jimmy finishes his breakfast and leaves the table. 'Jimmy, you forgot to clear your dishes again! We talked about this yesterday.' Jimmy whinges and complains. 'Why do I have to? Polly doesn't have to.'

'Polly's too little. Act like a big boy and set an example for your sister. Don't argue with me.' He reluctantly comes back and clears his dishes, kicking his sister's chair along the way.

'Come on, we've got to hurry and clean your teeth.' Jimmy slowly walks to the bathroom and cleans his teeth for about ten seconds. 'OK, run and get your shoes on so we won't be late for school!' Jimmy slowly walks to where his shoes are. His mother ties his shoes for him, even though he knows how, and helps him into his jacket, even though he can do it himself, because they are running late.

They leave the house in a rush. Jimmy is silent in the car and his mother is feeling annoyed and stressed, as she does most mornings.

When they get to school, she drops him off and says, 'Have a great day!'

Parents tell me that once their children are at school, the most stressful part of their day is over. They are exhausted by nine a.m.! For the first two hours of their day, they've been trying to get a seemingly immovable object to complete all the necessary morning tasks. But the children are ignoring instructions, dawdling and misbehaving. And when we try to get them to hurry up, they seem to go even slower.

We may become impatient and resort to nagging, repeating, threatening and shouting. Lack of cooperation brings out the worst in us. And even if we can see that our annoyed reactions aren't helping to achieve cooperation, often we don't know what else to do. In order for us to break this endless cycle of repeating and reminding, we have to do something different to get a different result. We have to communicate differently with our children so they are motivated to do what we ask.

Let's fast forward. Jimmy's parents have been using the 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting' strategies so now he does what he needs to do in the morning, most of it without even having to be reminded.

Cooperative Jimmy's good morning:

Jimmy is awakened by an alarm that he himself set the night before. He gets out of bed, turns off the alarm, puts on the clothes that he laid out the night before and makes his bed.

When his mother comes into his room, she gives Jimmy a hug and a big smile. Jimmy smiles and hugs her back. She notices what he's already accomplished and mentions it: 'Jimmy, you're remembering to do so many things in the mornings. You're getting up to your own alarm, you're getting dressed without anybody helping you, and today you made your bed without my reminding you! You're becoming very self-reliant.'

Jimmy comes downstairs and does his morning chores. At breakfast, Jimmy eats without getting up from the table, sings a silly song with his little sister, clears his bowl without being asked and puts it in the dishwasher. His mother notices this and comments that he's helping to keep the kitchen tidy. She also mentions that because he did all his chores without being reminded, he's on track to earn his computer time that evening after his homework is done.

His mother asks him to come to the bathroom for teeth cleaning, and he willingly cleans his teeth. He brushes his hair too quickly, missing a part at the back. 'There's one bit of your hair that looks like it still needs brushing.' He looks in the mirror, finds the part that's sticking up and brushes it. His mother says, 'You got that part to lie flat'.

He then goes and puts his shoes on and ties them himself. He's ready for school a bit early so he has some time to play with his cars.

Mother and son are ready to leave the flat when she notices that he doesn't have his backpack. She doesn't get annoyed; she just gives him a little clue. 'Jimmy, there's still something to remember that you'll need for school.' Jimmy looks around and sees his backpack and runs back for it.

They leave early enough to get to school on time. They chat during the drive, and they arrive a bit early so he can play with his friends in the playground. They say goodbye and hug briefly.

His mother gives him a big smile and says she's looking forward to seeing him after school.

Perhaps this second scenario sounds far too good to be true, but it is entirely achievable when parents are equipped with the right tools. Imagine how much calmer we could be in the mornings if we had this level of cooperation and self-reliance from our children! We could easily accomplish our morning tasks, we wouldn't feel annoyed or frustrated, and we would actually have time to enjoy our children. Thousands of families who practise the strategies have experienced this transformation.

How our behaviour affects our kids

Let's think about the cooperative Jimmy. He's getting positive attention from his parents for being self-reliant and cooperative. He's getting smiles and hugs instead of annoyance. He's hearing all about what he is doing right, instead of criticism about what he's not doing. He's developing confidence because he's doing so many things for himself. He's proud of himself. He is rewarded for his behaviour with extra playtime and relaxed, unstressed parents. He starts his school day feeling confident.

On the other hand, the uncooperative Jimmy is only hearing about what he's doing wrong from the moment he wakes up until he gets to school. Instead of smiles, he gets annoyed looks. He sees himself as someone who does things wrong and forgets everything because that's what he hears most days. Of course he starts to tune his parents out because it seems like all they ever do is nag and threaten. He stops looking his parents in the eye because it's no fun being told off. Because Jimmy is not being required to do what he is capable of doing, he is not getting the opportunity to grow in confidence. He resents his little sister because she gets to be the baby – where's the fun in being older? He feels like there's nothing he can do to please his parents. He starts his school day feeling deflated.

I've painted two scenarios that may seem extreme because I want to make a point. But for many families, the first scenario is not really all that extreme! Many of us recognise our kids and ourselves as we read about the first Jimmy. Maybe we've nagged and shouted and done too much for our children. Maybe we've gone further and even smacked our kids out of frustration with the lack of cooperation. The two scenarios illustrate how our communication affects our children. We want cooperative, confident and self-reliant children, and when we're not getting that, we feel frustrated and angry.

I've included these before and after scenarios to help parents understand that what we say and do either helps our children achieve the habits we want or unintentionally robs our children of the opportunity to develop those habits. The well-behaved Jimmy wasn't born that cooperative and self-reliant. He developed those habits because his parents had learned how to motivate him to want to be cooperative and self-reliant. They had learned simple proactive strategies to help prevent most behaviour problems.

If you have a child who is older, perhaps eleven to thirteen, the type of uncooperative morning behaviour you are faced with may be different. Your teen or preteen might moan or talk disrespectfully, *'I'm too tired to get up – you're always having a go at me.'* It's easy to get sucked into an argument about why she's tired and what she needs to do: *'Well, if you didn't stay up so late texting your friends, you wouldn't be so tired and grumpy. If you don't get up now, you'll make us all late. Don't be selfish.'*

As understandable as that kind of reaction may be, arguing isn't how we want our child's day (or our day) to begin, and it won't motivate her to get into better habits. The proactive strategies I share with you in my book, *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting*, will. I know many thirteen-year-olds who get up to an alarm, make their bed, greet their parents with warmth and respect, practise their instrument before school and even do a few morning chores with no prompting from their parents. It is achievable.

I'll say it again: Every family can make the transformation from a typically stressed household to a calmer, easier, happier household. It's never too late, even if your children are already teenagers.

The 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting' promise: You can transform even the most frustrating aspects of parenting

Based on my experience of helping tens of thousands of families, I feel completely confident in making this promise to you: as you practise these strategies – and in my books I give you a detailed plan for putting them into practice successfully – you will begin to see improvements in your child's behaviour within a few weeks (and for many families even within the first few days).

When parents are willing to learn and practise the highly effective strategies I'll be sharing with you, profound changes take place. Within weeks, family life becomes calmer, children are more cooperative, parents feel less frustrated and more in charge, siblings get on better with fewer disagreements. Family flashpoints which once were battles, such as homework, chores, bedtimes and mealtimes, become less stressful and more enjoyable.

These are achievable goals! The 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting' tools have been used by parents around the world to achieve exactly these results. Of course, there are variations in children's temperaments, so it may take longer with some children than with others. But you will get there!

There are two words I always use to describe the 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting' strategies: practical and effective. Practical means you can do them; effective means they work. The more you practise these parenting strategies, the more confident you'll become. And eventually using these skills will become a habit you won't even have to think about much. The new skills will start to come naturally.

What frustrates parents the most

If your family life were calmer, easier and happier, how would things be different at home?

Whenever I ask this question in a seminar, hands go shooting up, and the first answer is always the same: *'I want my kids to listen the first time. I can't stand it when they talk back or just ignore me! I don't want to have to keep repeating myself and then finally shouting.'*

When we feel forced to repeat instructions, our annoyance and irritation rises, until we finally reach breaking point. Maybe the breaking point is after we have repeated ourselves three times; maybe it's after ten times.

Some parents say that their child 'doesn't listen', some say their child 'ignores' them or 'tunes them out'. Some parents tell me they frequently have to shout or get angry before their children take them seriously. However we describe it, this lack of first-time cooperation from our children is maddening, making us feel compelled to scold, nag, shout, threaten or punish.

Parents don't want to repeat themselves endlessly or to keep reminding their child to do what he's supposed to do. Parents want their child to do what they ask, and to do it the first time they ask. What parents want is cooperation. I'll be talking a lot about cooperation in this book, so let me explain how I define it.

Cooperation: Children do what they are asked to do the first time they are asked and without a fuss - ninety percent of the time.

Can you imagine how much calmer and easier parenting would be if the first time you asked your daughter to put on her shoes, she did it? Or if you asked your son to put his lunchbox on the kitchen counter and he followed through? When some parents hear my definition of 'cooperation', they worry that ninety percent sounds like too much; they are concerned that this degree of cooperation would somehow squash their child's spirit.

The good news is that when children are learning to behave sensibly, the very opposite happens. Becoming more cooperative helps children feel better about themselves because they're getting told off less, they're getting less irritation directed towards them, and they're getting more smiles and more appreciation. This helps children develop strong self-esteem. Cooperation helps children develop maturity and common sense. Over time the largely cooperative child internalises the parents' values so that eventually he learns to tell himself the right thing to do.

Every family has its own unique issues and 'flashpoints'. Some of the typical ones that parents often mention are getting out the door on time in the mornings, bedtime battles, sibling conflicts, homework hassles and food and mealtime issues. The common theme in all of these challenges is a problem with cooperation. Lack of cooperation is actually just a habit that children gradually drift into. When you start using different strategies, your children will start to cooperate, and you won't feel driven to repeat and remind.

Cooperation: The gateway habit

In addition to cooperation, parents tell me that they want their children and teens to become confident, motivated, self-reliant and considerate.

At 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting', we have found that the first of these five foundation habits – cooperation – is the gateway into the other four habits.

Until children are cooperating, they won't be willing to do things for themselves (self-reliance) or to be polite most of the time (consideration) or to try new things (confidence) or to stick at a task even when it's difficult (motivation). When your children learn to be cooperative, they naturally become more confident, motivated, self-reliant and considerate. So rather than worrying about how you are going to train your children in all five habits, if you concentrate most of your training on this one gateway habit, cooperation, the other four will follow quite easily and with much less effort.

What family life is like with and without cooperation

Let's think about what family life is like when our children are cooperative, what it's like when they aren't, and what we usually do to try to get our kids to cooperate.

When cooperation is the norm, here's what we get more of:

- More time for fun
- A more peaceful home life
- Motivated children
- Smiles and hugs
- Confident parents and kids

Without cooperation, here's what we get more of:

- Tension
- Rushing
- Nagging
- Negotiating
- Frustration and stress
- Arguments
- Tantrums
- Blame
- Defiance
- Criticism

Who's in charge?

This is a rhetorical question, of course. We all know that we, the parents, should be in charge.

But in many families, parents have unwittingly allowed their children to be in charge. As a result I am often asked, 'How do I get my children to do what I want them to do?'

One part of the answer is that we cannot physically make our children do very much, although we may be able to physically stop them from doing some things, at least while they are still small. We cannot control what anybody else does, including our children. The more we try to make children do things our way, the more we annoy our children and cause them to resent us and resist us. But we can influence our children. Influencing is about making it more and more likely that our children will want to do things when and how we think they should be done.

When we are focused on controlling, we become upset when things are not happening the way we think they should be happening. But when we are influencing, we can stay calmer and more positive because we know that we can learn strategies which will guide our children into better habits over time. Of course, we cannot know in advance exactly how long it will take to establish the habits that matter to us, but we know we will not give up so we know that it will happen, sooner or later.

The strategy of Descriptive Praise that you will learn about in this e-book will teach you how to influence – not control – your children so that they become more and more cooperative, confident, motivated, self-reliant and considerate. They will be less and less likely to misbehave. Family life will become calmer, easier and happier.

Descriptive Praise: The most powerful motivator

I am falling in love with my kids again

I've got to share . . . I went to a 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting' talk last night but was not so convinced Descriptive Praise would work. One of my boys, Sean, constantly screams – happy, sad, it doesn't matter – he just looks me in the face, opens his mouth as wide as he can and lets out the loudest shrieks.

I just didn't see how acknowledging his quiet moments was going to make any difference. I had really gone to the seminar to come away with some new punishment techniques! I was so sceptical that I didn't even tell my husband about it. But I figured I had nothing to lose, so I tried it.

This morning I mentioned every small thing I could see that the kids were doing right. I waited through Sean's three screams, and whenever he had his mouth shut or was talking instead of screaming, I said, 'I notice how quiet you are, Sean. Now I want to listen to you'. And wow! Instead of screaming all morning, he was quiet.

He was also much quieter at preschool, and as I was picking him up, the preschool director took me aside and asked what happened differently this morning. I told her about the seminar and how it was working after just two hours of implementation.

You can bet that tonight I'll be sitting with my husband telling him all about my Calmer, Easier, Happier day!

Mother of two, aged 6 and 4

Descriptive Praise, the first core strategy

In all my years of working with families, I have found Descriptive Praise to be the single most powerful strategy for motivating children to want to cooperate and do their best. Learning how to use this new skill can transform your family life, improving your children's behaviour and guiding them to become the very best they can be. Just as you read in the story above, a lot of parents doubt that Descriptive Praise will make much of a difference in their child's behaviour because it just seems too simplistic to be very effective. Luckily, you don't have to believe it's going to work for it to work! Just start doing it, and you'll see the results.

So what is Descriptive Praise? Very simply, Descriptive Praise means noticing and then specifically describing what your child has done that pleases you. Once you have mastered the skill of Descriptive Praise, you will be well on your way to achieving a calmer, easier and happier family life.

Descriptive Praise will help children want to cooperate the first time you ask them to do something. And Descriptive Praise begins to work as soon as you start using it. If you have a child with an easy-going temperament, you are likely to see results almost immediately. If your child has a trickier temperament – more sensitive, intense,

impulsive or inflexible – you may see some improvement immediately, but significantly results can take two to four weeks.

How we usually praise our children

We've all heard that we should praise our children frequently to build up their self-esteem. What do you normally say when your child does something you're pleased about? If you're like most of the parents I ask, you probably say something like, *'Well done!'* or *'Wonderful'* or *'Fantastic'* or *'Good job'*. You're hoping that this praise will help your child to become more confident and to feel loved and secure and special. Or maybe you're praising to motivate your child to try a new activity.

Or you want to help her be more resilient and confident so she doesn't give up when a task feels difficult. We often praise our children to encourage them to do more of any behaviour that they might be feeling anxious or resistant about. You might say, *'You're doing really well!'*, *'You're so clever!'* *'Keep up the good work!'* *'Wow, that was amazing!'*

Why praising with superlatives doesn't work

As well intentioned as this kind of over-the-top praise certainly is, the problem is that it doesn't really work to improve behaviour or habits. Praising with superlatives is too general, too vague and, truthfully, it's also exaggerated.

Parents tend to say *'Wonderful'* and *'Terrific'* and *'That's lovely'* and *'You're the best'* automatically. But your child can see that often we've barely glanced at the drawing or handstand or Lego construction. He can also see that the rest of the world is not saying how amazing and terrific he is, so he doesn't really believe these superlative statements. Your child concludes, rightly, that the overblown praise is not a true assessment of his behaviour or work, but an expression of your love.

What's wrong with that? Of course we want to tell our children that we love them frequently, but let's not do it with exaggerated and perhaps undeserved praise, as that will lead them to doubt our judgement or our honesty. Furthermore, when we applaud a mediocre effort, the child may wonder whether we even believe he's capable of doing any better.

There is another problem with this type of inflated praise. Current research in educational psychology, by investigators such as Carol Dweck, strongly suggests that praising intelligence or outcomes actually backfires and diminishes motivation as well as performance. What is effective for increasing motivation and the willingness to take on challenges is focusing praise on the child's effort, on what the child has done, not on an ability he can't control (such as intelligence) or on the final result (which he may not easily be able to replicate).

And finally, when we're talking about how we can motivate children to improve their behaviour, this superlative praise is too general to convey any useful information about what children can do in the future to get more parental acknowledgement and appreciation. For example, when we say, *'You're eating so nicely'* or *'You two are playing together so beautifully'*, our children often don't really know what it is that we like about how they are eating or playing together. We intend the praise to be a teaching tool, showing our children that we like something they have done so they'll be motivated to do it again, but statements like this are far too vague to achieve that aim.

So I am going to ask you to avoid all those superlatives like 'amazing', 'wonderful', 'fabulous' and 'terrific', even 'well done' and 'good job'. Instead, I'm going to show you a new way to praise that has been proven to be much more effective at improving your child's behaviour, willingness and self-confidence.

What does work: Descriptive Praise!

Descriptive Praise is about noticing and commenting on exactly what your child has done that is right or just OK, or even what he hasn't done wrong. This means we need to momentarily stop what we're doing and really pay attention to what our child is doing and not doing. The very act of slowing down and paying attention gives us a valuable 'window', a little bit of time that we can devote to communicating our specific appreciation.

KEY CONCEPT

Superlative Praise = vague, exaggerated and ineffective:

'Wow, your homework is brilliant!'

Descriptive Praise = specific, true and motivating:

'You answered all the questions on this worksheet, even though you weren't sure about some of the answers. You didn't leave any blanks. You challenged yourself and wrote something down for every single question.'

If your child is eating his dinner without a fuss, just describe exactly what you like about his behaviour. *'You're eating your dinner without complaining about the food.'* Or you could say, *'You tasted the peas; that was brave,'* or, *'Even though your potatoes are touching your lentils, you didn't say "Yuk".'* This is an effective way of communicating your values to your child, such as appreciating the meal instead of complaining, trying what's on his plate even if he thinks he won't like it and being flexible about foods touching each other on his plate.

If your children are playing well together, you might say, *'You're sharing the Lego, and there's no grabbing,'* or *'No one's teasing,'* or *'For ten whole minutes you two have been sitting there drawing quietly, and neither of you has come to me with any complaints about the other one.'* This Descriptive Praise reinforces for your children that sharing, being considerate and working out sibling issues on their own are all important values in your family.

Because Descriptive Praise is so specific, it cannot be argued with; it is a fact. You're not making sweeping, over-the-top statements that can easily be disputed or discounted. Instead, you are describing, very specifically and in detail, what your child is doing that pleased you. Maybe he did the right thing, or maybe it was just barely OK, but it was an improvement on what he might have done. You can even notice and mention when your child is not doing anything wrong.

Descriptive Praise lets your children know exactly what you want them to do and not do. It is a huge relief to children not to have to try and figure out exactly what we mean when we say, *'Behave!'* By telling your children exactly what they did right (or did not do wrong), Descriptive Praise gives them a blueprint for getting even more positive attention. With this new kind of praise, your children will see and hear, many times a day, that you are pleased with them. This motivates them to try even more to do what is expected of them. Descriptive Praise proves to children that they can do the right thing, since they just did it. The good behaviour will therefore seem easier to do again.

KEY CONCEPT

Descriptive Praise improves behaviour

The concept of Descriptive Praise is easy to grasp:

1. Notice a little thing that your child is doing that is right – or even the smallest step in the right direction!
2. Tell your child exactly what you notice. Describe the behaviour in detail.
3. Leave out the over-the-top superlatives.

You may be worried that Descriptive Praise will create a 'praise junkie', a child who only behaves in order to get his parents' approval. Fortunately, that is the opposite of what happens. At first children are motivated to do the right thing because they want to please us. But the more they hear about what they are doing right, the sooner they internalise these standards of behaviour. After a while, they will do the right thing because it feels right, because their conscience tells them to do it. Good behaviour becomes a habit.

As children become more confident that they can behave well, their common sense increases. They become more willing to monitor their own behaviour, rather than to react impulsively or defiantly.

Impressive attention to detail

My son Andrew, who is twelve, had just completed a practice test for an upcoming music theory exam, and I was grading it. Usually he misses several things, but this time he didn't miss any. I remember saying to my husband, 'Wow, Andrew did an amazing job on this practice test!' As I said it, I remembered about Descriptive Praise and took a minute to think about what was actually so 'amazing'.

I went to Andrew and said, 'I looked at your practice test, and that was the most thorough, careful work I've seen yet. I could tell that you went back and double-checked each section before you finished, and that you even caught some mistakes – impressive attention to detail! Guess what your score was?' He looked up at me with a grin and said, 'Ninety-five percent?' I shook my head and said, 'No, you got one hundred percent.' He beamed. That weekend he took the actual exam and scored one hundred percent.

Mother of two, aged 12 and 10

As you can see from this story, our natural reaction is to praise excellent achievement by saying it's 'amazing'. When you take the time to think about what was so amazing and describe it in detail, your child will then have some very useful information. This builds his confidence, leading him to think, 'That's how I did so well on the test; I can do that again.'

Descriptive Praise makes sense, but it may feel awkward at first. It isn't how we're used to talking to our kids. But it is far more effective than a vague and exaggerated 'brilliant' or 'amazing'.

My three-year-old bit my bottom in the supermarket!

I had been practising Descriptive Praise for about a year when I was stunned by this incident. My three-year-old, Katie, and I were in the supermarket, and there was some food she wanted that I told her we wouldn't be buying. My strong-willed little girl reacted by actually biting my bottom. Apparently it was the nearest thing she could find and just the right height! I was stunned – and sore.

So the next time we were going to the shops, I talked with Katie about the right way to behave before we left – staying next to me, no biting, etc. As soon as we got to the shop, I said, 'You've been staying next to me, and you haven't bitten me on the bottom once!' Other shoppers looked at me like I was crazy, but the Descriptive Praise worked. She stayed next to me and didn't bite me.

Mother of two, aged 6 and 3

The Descriptive Praise helped Katie's behaviour to improve. Notice also that before this mother went back to the supermarket with her daughter, she made sure to clarify her expectations of how Katie should behave. In my books I explain how you can make sure your children know exactly what they should do, not just what they shouldn't do. This will help them to do more and more things right.

How to Descriptively Praise to get more of the behaviour we want: Mentioning small steps in the right direction

When we're looking for positive behaviour to praise, sometimes we have to use a metaphorical magnifying glass to find tiny things to praise. We have to capture the little steps in the right direction that we might ordinarily overlook. For example, your child might be sitting in front of his homework, with his pencil in his hand, but you can tell he's daydreaming. Instead of telling him to 'Focus!' you could say, 'You're holding your pencil; you're ready to write.' We need to mention these little positive steps.

Or perhaps your child isn't yet in the habit of doing whatever it is you want her to do consistently, but she does do it right sometimes. Let's say that your daughter usually forgets to hang up her towel after taking a shower, but on this occasion she has remembered. You might not think of mentioning it when she does it right because you feel she should already be in the habit. But she isn't yet. So, instead of saying nothing, I suggest you say something like, 'I noticed you remembered to hang up your towel. You're helping to keep our house tidy.'

Or perhaps you'd like your son to get into the habit of putting the toilet seat down. On the rare occasion when he does it, you can say, 'You remembered to put the toilet seat down. That was considerate.'

In case you're thinking that Descriptive Praise won't be enough to get your children into good habits, you're right. I am not suggesting that Descriptive Praise will cure all problems. We have many other tools in the 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting' toolkit, and some or all of them may be needed to get the toilet seat put down or the towel hung up on a regular basis. But we need to motivate our children to be willing to pay attention to what we say so that the other tools will be effective. Descriptive Praise is the best motivator I know of.

Getting more of the behaviour you want

More examples of Descriptive Praise for small steps in the right direction:

'You've already got your underwear and one sock on!'

'You're almost halfway dressed.'

'I told you it was time to clean your teeth, and you took a step towards the sink.'

'You put one of your sweet wrappers in the recycling bin.'

As you've been reading these examples of Descriptive Praise, you may have noticed that there are no superlatives. You won't say it is fantastic or wonderful because your child knows it isn't actually wonderful to hang up a towel or put the toilet seat down. But your child will see and hear that you are pleased, and he will know exactly what he's done to deserve the appreciation.

Because children naturally want our approval, they are more likely to repeat the actions that earned them the Descriptive Praise. Very quickly they become more and more motivated to do the right thing.

Getting my son to cooperate at bath time

What I like about Descriptive Praise is that it gives me a specific strategy I can use when I have trouble getting my children to cooperate. I started using Descriptive Praise on all the small things my children were doing right, and they responded immediately. It was amazing how much happier they all became, and they started to look for more ways to please me. They even made me breakfast in bed!

I also used Descriptive Praise to deal with a specific problem. When my son was three years old, I used to really struggle to get him out of the bath. One evening I decided to try Descriptive Praise. When it was time for him to get out of the bath, I said, 'Bath time is over. It's time to get out now.' I waited until he made even the smallest move towards the side of the bath and then immediately began to Descriptively Praise him. I said something like, 'You're coming right away. You're coming the first time I asked!' He gave me a huge smile and came out of the bath right away, without a fuss.

Mother of three, aged 8, 6 and 3

Descriptive Praise can reduce annoying behaviour

Parents are anxious to learn how to get rid of, or at least reduce, their children's annoying (or possibly even worrying) habits. Descriptive Praise is a powerful tool for this as well. Habits such as nail-biting, thumb-sucking, complaining, dawdling, squabbling with siblings, ignoring instructions – these are the sorts of negative behaviours we want to reduce.

Here's what to do. Start noticing whenever your child is not doing the annoying habit, and Descriptively Praise the absence of that negative behaviour. This is the opposite of how we usually react.

In the past, we've probably noticed what our child was doing wrong and then asked her to stop. Now I am asking you to notice not just your child's major

accomplishments, but also the smallest efforts, even when the result is not yet really satisfactory.

At first you may need that metaphorical magnifying glass to help you to slow down and focus on the many times during the day when your child is not irritating you.

Even when it feels as if your child is not doing much right at the moment, **you can foster goodwill and increase motivation by talking about what she is not doing wrong:**

'You remembered not to grab.'

'You're not touching. You're just looking with your eyes.'

'You didn't interrupt; you waited until I got off the telephone.'

'It's so quiet in the back seat.'

'You finished the first two sums without any complaining.'

When you Descriptively Praise the absence of an annoying behaviour, you'll soon see less of that behaviour.

Decreasing annoying habits

More examples of **Descriptive Praise to decrease annoying habits:**

'You've stopped arguing, even though I can see you're still upset about what I said.'

'Now you're remembering not to talk with your mouth full. That's polite.'

'You're not grabbing now. You're being considerate.'

'No one's shouting.'

Even though it may not seem like it at times, most misbehaviour is actually minor, rather than major. It's just that if we're dealing with a lot of it, it feels major! Most misbehaviour is impulsive and thoughtless, and often it is over as quickly as it started, for example, grabbing, interrupting, stepping on a book instead of stepping over it or whingeing 'Why?' in response to an instruction.

A useful strategy, when your child does something annoying, is to wait a few seconds. As soon as your child stops, or even pauses for breath, jump in with some Descriptive Praise! In the earlier story, Sean's mother reduced his screaming by waiting until he stopped screaming and then quickly praising him for being quiet.

We tend to notice and mention a child's negative behaviour because it is so irritating. But even a child who is impulsive or defiant and who might do a lot of annoying things in the course of a typical day, is not doing those annoying or negative things all day long (although it may sometimes feel like it). So it's important to notice whenever he's not doing the annoying behaviour and Descriptively Praise him for not doing it. The more you notice and mention when your child is not arguing or complaining, the more cooperative your child will become. The more you notice when your child is not teasing or grabbing or fiddling with something, the more mature his behaviour will become.

But let's say that your child is in the middle of a marathon complaining session and you are wondering what you could possibly find to Descriptively Praise. Just be a bit patient because pretty soon your child will pause, if only to draw breath, and at that moment you need to jump in with Descriptive Praise. With a big smile you can say

(through gritted teeth if necessary), 'You've stopped whingeing.' You may need quick reflexes to catch those few seconds of silence!

Of course, your child may start whingeing again, especially in the first few weeks of this new strategy. He may be testing you. Again, just wait a bit. Praise him again for not whingeing. Sooner or later (it will probably feel like hours even if it's only a few minutes) your child will stop whingeing altogether, and it usually happens much sooner than you could imagine. And then you can say, 'You've stopped whingeing, and that's such a pleasant, friendly voice. Now I'd love to listen to you!' This may feel counter-intuitive at first, but it works!

Reducing potty language and interrupting

I couldn't believe how much easier it was to get my four-year-old twins to do things like come to the car straightaway after childcare, when I Descriptively Praised them. However, I must say that I doubted that Descriptive Praise would work to stop annoying habits. But since pointing out the bad habits didn't improve anything, I thought I might as well try it.

So when the twins were going through an annoying stage of using potty language, I decided to try Descriptively Praising them for not using the potty language. The first time I praised them, they started using the potty language again straightaway. But I persevered, and after a while they just stopped.

At the same time I also used Descriptive Praise to stop them interrupting each other and raising their voices to make themselves heard, which they used to do all the time. After story time one evening I said, 'You're using kind words with your brother, and you took turns to talk to each other the whole day long. No one interrupted each other. Very considerate.' Both broke into enormous smiles, and I knew they were proud of their achievement.

Mother of twins, aged 4

It's important to make this an all-out campaign. For a month, commit to noticing and mentioning all the times when your child is not biting her nails, not banging his fork on the table, not dangling the cat upside down by the tail, not correcting her sibling, etc. Any ongoing problem needs an ongoing solution!

Descriptive Praise paragraphs

For maximum positive effect, turn your Descriptive Praise sentences into paragraphs.

Sometimes a child who has been getting a lot of negative attention for misbehaving no longer really believes that he is capable of pleasing his parents. In self-defence, he may shut down, becoming 'parent-deaf'. His defences may be so strong that he barely hears or registers short Descriptive Praises such as, 'Thanks for putting your plate in the sink.' But when we take the time and make the effort to turn these one-liners into paragraphs, this child is far more likely to hear us. You might say, 'You remembered to put your plate in the sink. I didn't even have to tell you. That shows a mature sense of responsibility. You're not expecting people to do things for you when you can do them yourself.' At this point, your child will probably look around to see what else he can put in the sink!

Adding 'qualities' makes your Descriptive Praise even more meaningful

Descriptive Praise becomes even more powerful when you can summarise what you have noticed by mentioning a quality, as has been demonstrated in some of the earlier examples.

Here are some qualities that parents usually tell me they want their children to develop:

- cooperation
- respectful, friendly tone of voice
- generosity
- patience
- consideration
- self-reliance and independence
- flexibility
- honesty
- courage
- self-control
- paying attention to details
- doing their best
- creativity
- perseverance

The more often you mention that your child has shown these positive qualities, the sooner your child will be able to see herself as someone who is cooperative, considerate, honest, courageous, etc. For example, if you want your child to be more patient you could say, *'You were sitting so still while I rinsed the shampoo out. That took patience, and it really helps me.'* Or to encourage self-reliance you could say, *'You remembered our new bedtime routine, and you did some of it all by yourself while I was on the phone. Very independent!'*

Sometimes we need to be reminded about our children's positive attributes and qualities. This is especially true if we have a child who has a more sensitive, intense or impulsive temperament, which can sometimes drive us crazy! One couple came home from my seminar and wrote down a list of all the qualities they valued and wanted their children to develop. This helped them have a focus for their Descriptive Praises. They put the list on the inside of a kitchen cupboard as a reminder to praise all those qualities whenever they saw even the slightest hint of them.

The more you look for the good qualities in your child, the more good qualities you will find, and soon you will be adding new words to your list.

Descriptive Praise helped us deal with our son's impulsivity and defiance

Our son Jack, eight years old, was very impulsive at home and at school. He grabbed, hated to share, ate with his fingers, loudly resisted homework and bedtimes. His teacher complained that he chatted rather than doing his work and was too rough with his classmates.

In the first Family Learning Session with Noël, he kept wandering around the room, interrupting, going into my handbag, immediately doing the opposite of whatever we praised him about. But we remembered to wait and then Descriptively Praised him when he stopped, instead of telling him off or repeating what we wanted him to do.

For a while we had to be so careful to remember the Descriptive Praise. I knew I had to do it consistently as much as possible every day or else he would slide back into his old habits. But soon he started asking for praise and even praising himself. After a while we could praise him ten times a day, rather than ten times an hour.

Jack is now so much calmer and more sensible. He's even more mature. And all of us are happier.
Mother of an 8-year-old

Descriptive Praise helps children calm down and start cooperating faster than our display of annoyance would.

How to phrase your Descriptive Praise

While the concept of Descriptive Praise is straightforward, putting it into action may feel awkward or uncomfortable at first. Because we are so used to saying 'Terrific,' or 'Brilliant,' you may feel stumped by how to phrase your Descriptive Praise sentences.

A really useful way to start a Descriptive Praise sentence is with the words, 'I notice . . . ' or 'I noticed...'

You could say, 'I noticed you put your napkin in your lap as soon as you sat down,' or 'I noticed that you put the milk away as soon as I asked.'

Children perk their ears up when they hear us saying 'I notice . . . ' because that's not the language we generally use when we are correcting or reprimanding. So when we say 'I notice' they soon expect to hear something nice about themselves, and they are motivated to listen.

With Descriptive Praise we are often talking about what our child is doing now, or what he has just done, so we can start most of our Descriptive Praise sentences very simply, with the word 'you'. As you were reading the examples earlier in this chapter, you probably noticed that most of them start with 'you'.

As you become more comfortable with 'catching them being good' you can start to experiment with injecting more variety into how you start your Descriptive Praises. In addition to smiling and looking pleased, you can say:

Sentence starters:

'You've been remembering to . . . '

'Three nights in a row now you . . . '

'Today, you didn't once . . . '

'I've noticed that you remembered to . . . '

'I hear you . . . '

'In the past week, you . . .'
'I remember that you . . .'
'In the past you . . . , but now you'
'You're still . . .'
'Yesterday, you . . .'
'Even though I could see you didn't want to, you . . .'
'Nowadays you usually . . .'
'I see that you . . .'

What not to praise

Focus most of your Descriptive Praise on the habits your children haven't mastered yet. Praising children for things they are already in the habit of doing correctly can feel insulting to them, especially for preteens and teens.

Before you begin practising Descriptive Praise

It can be overwhelming if we tweak and change too many things at once. The skill of Descriptive Praise is extremely effective, so you'll want to give yourself time to become comfortable using it and to experience the positive results. Once you see the difference that Descriptive Praise can make, you'll feel more confident, and you'll be eager to learn the next strategies that I talk about in my book, *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting*.

Here is an important point I want you to think about. What I'm talking about is how to influence behaviour, how to change our children's habits. But first, in order to do that, we have to change our own habits. We have to alter how we're communicating with our kids. Learning any new skill takes a lot of practice and determination, so please give yourself time to be successful with Descriptive Praise.

I'm going to give you more examples of Descriptive Praise in this last section, and I'll also answer some of the questions parents typically ask as they begin putting this skill into action. And remember that you can use Descriptive Praise across all behaviour issues; you don't need a new skill for tackling each habit!

Putting Descriptive Praise into practice: Your Action Plan for the first two weeks

How to motivate your child so that you see more of the behaviour you want and less of the annoying behaviour:

1. Choose two annoying behaviours you'd like your child to improve, and write them down.
2. For each behaviour, notice and Descriptively Praise every time your child does it right or just OK or even just a bit better than before.
3. Notice and mention when your child isn't doing the annoying behaviour.
4. Avoid superlatives!
5. Make a goal of Descriptively Praising some aspect of the improved behaviour at least ten times a day.

Example of an annoying behaviour: Not doing what you ask the first time

Cooperation is a really useful habit to target first as it's the gateway to improving so many other important habits.

Notice the times each day when your child does what you ask, even if she does only a part of what you ask.

'I asked you to shut the door, and you did it right away. That was cooperative.'

(An important tip: Be sure to praise the fact that the child cooperated, not just what she did. In the above example, the parent didn't say, 'Thanks for shutting the door.' The praise needs to be focused on the cooperation.)

You can also describe the absence of the negative behaviour:

'I noticed that when Dad told you to feed the dog, you hardly complained at all.'

'Even though you wanted to play longer, you came inside as soon as I asked. You didn't waste any time.'

'Three times today, when I asked you to do something, you did it the first time, without arguing.'

'I asked you to put on your jacket, and you got it off the hook without making a face.'

'You stopped arguing about turning off the telly.'

'You didn't roll your eyes when I told you to make your bed.'

Example of an annoying behaviour: Whingeing

An important tip: Be sure to address your child's whingey, impatient or disrespectful tone of voice, even if the words he is saying are reasonable. As long as we're willing to answer our children when they're whingeing, they'll keep whingeing!

'You stopped whingeing. Now I want to listen to you.'

'You used a friendly voice to ask for a treat.'

'For the past five minutes, you've been talking to me without any whingeing. What a respectful voice!'

'You started to whinge, but then you stopped yourself. That shows self-control.'

'It's so pleasant being with you when you use a polite tone of voice.'

Summary

When you Descriptively Praise your children, taking the time to notice all the good and even the just OK behaviour, you will start to appreciate your children more and enjoy being with them more! You'll see better behaviour sooner than you can imagine.

Before you begin your campaign of Descriptive Praise, you may not believe that this one strategy could possibly make such a difference to family life. It's OK to be sceptical. I've had many sceptics come through my courses, and when they see for themselves what a difference Descriptive Praise can make with their children, they become some of the biggest fans of 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting'.

Your children will become more confident because they are hearing far more about what they are doing right than about what they are doing wrong. And you will start to feel better and more confident about your parenting. As one parent told me, *'Now that I'm using Descriptive Praise, I feel, finally, that I'm a good mother.'*

Parents want to know - Questions and Answers

Q: I think my preteen twins will look at me like I just landed from Mars if I start Descriptively Praising. How can I explain what I'm doing?

A: At first your children, especially teens and preteens, may well think you've taken leave of your senses - but do persevere! If something is right (in this case, both respectful and effective), it is right, even if it mystifies our children. You can explain to them, 'In the past I made a lot of mistakes as a parent (this will get their attention, though they may be disconcertingly ready to agree with you!). I used to point out your mistakes and nag or shout when I wanted you to do what I said. I can see now that it didn't work. It made you resentful and annoyed. And it made me feel bad too. So now I'm going to practise doing something different. I'm going to notice and mention the things you do right. I can't guarantee that I'll always be perfect, but I'm going to keep practising so I can improve.'

* * * *

Q: I understand about using Descriptive Praise to get more cooperation. But what about when my children are not cooperating? No matter how many times I repeat myself, they don't listen. Help!

A: If we are in the habit of repeating ourselves, our children gradually learn to tune us out, waiting (without their even realising it) for the repeated reminders. Only when we signal the importance of the matter by raising our voice, or perhaps threatening a consequence, do our children take the instruction seriously. If we are willing to repeat an instruction five times, we will soon find that we need to repeat it six times!

This phenomenon of children tuning us out explains why parents often report, 'My children don't take any notice of what I say until I get angry. Then they cooperate. But why do I have to shout and threaten before they will listen?' Don't despair. In my book, *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting*, I will give you strategies so that you won't feel the need to repeat yourself!

Another reason our children may ignore our instructions is that if we have not been consistent about *following through* on instructions and rules in the past, our children won't assume that we really mean it this time. They will just wait and see what happens, which buys them more time to do what they feel like doing. The unpredictability of parents' responses leaves a lot of room for subtle testing as well as outright misbehaviour.

Even children who are usually cooperative will test in situations where they can sense, from their parents' initial reaction, that parents are uncomfortable about *following through*. They may try to 'bend the rules' without quite breaking them. This often happens in public, where children can see that the parents' embarrassment is keeping them from *following through*.

Sometimes what we, the adults, think of as being flexible about rules looks to the child as if we're giving in. The more consistently we *follow through*, the more our children will listen to us, take our instructions seriously and cooperate. Again, in

'Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting', I explain how to follow through so that your children and teens know that you mean what you say.

* * * *

Q: I'm worried that Descriptively Praising my children when they're not misbehaving might remind them to misbehave. What can I do to stop this from happening?

A: In the first few weeks, especially if your child tends to be impulsive, he may react to Descriptive Praise by occasionally doing the exact opposite of what you just praised him for. That's because the Descriptive Praise reminds him of the misbehaviour, and then his impulsivity gets the better of him. This can be very annoying, of course, and it may feel as if you are going backwards, so you may be tempted to give up on the Descriptive Praise. But keep Descriptively Praising even if the behaviour gets worse temporarily before it gets better. Persevere, and this phase won't last long. Soon he will naturally and automatically begin to try to control himself.

It's natural that when you first start Descriptively Praising the absence of the negative behaviour, that your children may test you by impulsively doing it again, just as the twins did in the earlier story. They may be used to getting your attention by misbehaving, but when you start giving them positive attention for stopping, you will soon see much less of the annoying behaviour. Persevere!

* * * *

Q: The idea of Descriptive Praise sounds great, but I'm worried it will sound false. I can't really see myself doing it, especially when I'm really fed up with the children and not feeling at all appreciative!

A: Descriptive Praise does not come naturally at first, and it may seem false to you. But in fact Descriptive Praise is the opposite of false because you are observing and noticing exactly what you see and hear. But it may feel awkward at first. So force yourself to Descriptively Praise, even when you are so annoyed that you don't feel or sound sincere. Even insincere-sounding Descriptive Praise is much more effective at improving behaviour than sincere correcting and shouting. Eventually the Descriptive Praise will become second nature, and you will find that you are feeling sincere when you say it.

When you don't feel the slightest bit appreciative, it's hard to remember that going through the motions of Descriptively Praising will actually make you feel better. It helps if you understand that to improve our children's behavior we don't need to feel calm or positive. All we need to do is to temporarily act calmer. This 'act' helps children calm down and start cooperating faster than our display of annoyance would. A delightful bonus of acting calm is that it often leads, sooner than one might imagine, to feeling calmer.

* * * *

Q: This is all so new to me, the idea of praising all the time – how can I keep remembering to do it? Is ten times a day really necessary?

A: There are two reasons why aiming for at least ten Descriptive Praises a day is so important. Of course one reason is that you want to improve your child's behaviour

as quickly as possible. The second reason is that you are changing your parenting behaviour, and that takes practice. So aim high and go for ten times a day or even more. If you do that, you'll find that within a week or two it becomes much easier to remember to Descriptively Praise, and you may well find yourself Descriptively Praising a lot more than ten times a day!

At first, you might find that you forget to say your ten Descriptive Praises each day. Here are some solutions that parents have come up with to help them remember:

- When you're tucking your children in at bedtime, say the Descriptive Praises that eluded you during the busy day.
- Use mealtimes, when you have a captive audience, to catch up on Descriptive Praises.
- Write 'DP' on Post-its and scatter them around your house – on the computer, fridge, kitchen cabinets, bathroom mirror, etc. Each time you see the note to yourself, it will jog your memory and remind you to say a Descriptive Praise.
- When the other parent comes home, or if you bump into an acquaintance, Descriptively Praise your child to the adult in your child's presence. He will be listening and absorbing your words and your appreciative tone, even if he seems oblivious.
- Establish some new habits for yourself. For example, make a plan to say a Descriptive Praise each time you:
 - get in the car
 - drop your child off or collect him from school
 - supervise bath time
 - see your child doing homework
 - see your children playing together

There is no doubt that Descriptive Praise makes a powerful, positive impact on behaviour, confidence, motivation and self-esteem. It is too powerful a tool not to use daily, many times a day!

* * * *

Q: I tried Descriptive Praise a few times, but it backfired on me. My son seems to hate being praised! He even stuck his fingers in his ears and started humming loudly to drown me out. So I stopped doing it. Why didn't it work?

A: As excited as you may be about Descriptive Praise, don't expect your child to transform magically overnight! Your child may even argue with you about Descriptive Praise or become visibly upset or try to tune you out. This phase does not last long.

Here are some possible reasons for the occasional negative reaction, and here is what parents can do to move through this phase as quickly as possible. It can feel like an insult to children if we Descriptively Praise 'small steps in the right direction' for behaviours they have already mastered. To avoid this, we can Descriptively Praise the fact that the good behaviour is becoming a habit. For example, instead of saying, 'Thanks for flushing the loo' to a child who now usually remembers to flush, we can say, 'Most of the time you're remembering to flush the loo and wash your hands, and you don't leave the towel on the floor any more.'

Or your child might be embarrassed to admit to himself that certain mature behaviour still needs to be reinforced by Descriptive Praise. He would like to believe that he has

long since mastered certain habits, such as turning lights off when leaving a room, not drumming on the table, speaking quietly indoors, saying 'please' and 'thank you', etc.

If your child seems not to like Descriptive Praise, to avoid upsetting him you may be tempted not to praise him. But don't give up on the Descriptive Praise. He will soon come to appreciate it and be motivated by it.

Sadly, boys are often considered naughty, rebellious and oppositional. Boys are corrected more than girls are, both at home and at school. This often leads to negative attention-seeking and to the gradual development of a self-image of being bad, unlikeable or 'thick'. Because of this entrenched low self-esteem, it may take longer with some boys for the Descriptive Praise to start working. Persevere! Your child may have been in the habit of getting negative attention for misbehaviour for years. Positive attention can be unsettling at first. A child who has been told off a lot may not believe, at first, that you could possibly be pleased with him so many times each day.

Your child might be so uncomfortable with his new persona that he even asks you to stop praising him. Don't stop praising him! Descriptive Praise is like medicine: it works even if we don't like the taste. With some children it may even take a few months before they feel comfortable with getting positive attention for positive behaviour.

A child who is relatively more intense or angry seems almost to enjoy the excitement of seeing a parent get upset. It is not so interesting when you stay calm and positive. He may be hooked on the power to wind you up, a skill he has perfected to a fine art. When you keep mentioning the positive, the child can see that you are in charge of your emotions. This can make him angry. He may have come to associate parental love with the intense emotions that accompany shouting, arguing, or telling off. Therefore, when you stay calm and positive, it may seem to your child as if you don't care about him any more. His familiar self-image may not give up without a fight.

I'm sure it's your goal to interact with your child in a more positive way, even if it temporarily upsets your child. And it's also important for you to be in charge of how you behave and to keep doing what you believe is right. So persevere, and soon positive attention will become the new normal in your home.

About this e-book

This e-book is extracted from Noël Janis-Norton's book *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting: The Revolutionary Programme That Transforms Family Life*.

Examples of the five-star feedback on Amazon for Noël's book:

'Every parent should be handed a copy of this as they leave the hospital!'

'Have noticed a change in my child's behaviour only a few days after using descriptive praise.'

'...the descriptive praise is impressive to see take effect...'

'Very useful in these difficult days of raising teenagers!'

'The methods are very easy to implement and the difference in my children was noticeable after the first day of using them. This book really has saved my sanity!'

'Brilliant book packed with really useful tips for managing your family! ... if you think you are not getting anywhere with your kids ... try this!'

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 444 77833 5
Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company
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