

Praise! What a good boy (girl) am I.
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Remember the nursery rhyme “Little Jack Horner sat in a corner eating his Christmas pie. Put in his thumb and pulled out a plumb and said ‘What a good boy am I.’” It seems to be a very modern reflection on a self-esteem movement gone awry where self-esteem is not based on real and solid values and accomplishments.

Montessori’s insight about being careful with praise is a major factor in helping children develop their own sense of value and sense of worth. She insisted that the value the child places on himself arise out of who the child is and not just on what he does. And that what he does meets an interior need of his own emotional development and is not done solely for the approval of the adult.

The challenge at this point is to separate what the child does from who he is and who he is becoming. The question of praise was also part of Montessori’s insight that the adult not substitute her will for the will of the child. This led her to be careful with praise so as not to overly influence the child’s actions (behaviors are another matter.) The direct influence on the child by the adult comes mainly from the adults influence and actions on the environment. The environment is not solely physical. It is an emotional environment and a social environment. The direct influence on the child is through this preparation and maintenance of this positive environment.

Montessori also noted that much learning was not accomplished or accompanied by much talk. It was the doing that created the learning.

Measured praise turns the child’s motivations inward instead of outward. The child’s motivations must ultimately come from the personality of the child. “I do this because this is what I was intended to do, impelled to do, called to do, created to do.”

Therefore, it is only in the balance where well-adjusted adults (confident in their knowledge and in their observations; knowing when, how and what to praise) that a child can gain a healthy, realistic self-image.

When praise is done right, the child is on his or her way to becoming independent – independent of negative peer pressure and negative expectations. The child’s actions will arise out of a storehouse of virtues and character and not be overly influenced by those around him or her but truly marching to a drum beat that reflects the child’s inner strengths and virtues.