

Celebrating pupil success – praise based on effort

Written by Kat Cauchi, Editor of R.I.S.E Magazine, ReallySchool Product Manager

Praise is a great motivator for pupils – they feel recognition and can see there is some value in what they are doing. It can be particularly useful for giving encouragement when pupils are finding things difficult or feeling stuck. Having said that, the way we choose to praise pupils is important. Praise needs to be authentic, and the best kind of praise is specific. For example, 'Good job using your number bonds knowledge to solve the problem' rather than the vague 'Good job.' Using just 'good job' may leave the pupil wondering what about it made it a good job? Is it because I got all the answers right, is it because I worked hard, or is it because I applied my knowledge of x? Whereas adding in the comment about number bonds knowledge gives the pupil a tangible reason why they did a good job.

This kind of praise also feeds into my first comment about the praise being authentic – if you can give a specific reason for delivering it, then it is more meaningful. Hollow praise can seem like you just want to appease the pupil, or you are just simply acknowledging they finished a task rather than actually celebrating their success.

Process praise

Additionally, when delivering praise, it is crucial to steer away from labels – e.g., 'You are so clever', 'You are smart' – towards a focus on process praise, where you acknowledge effort and hard work. Pupils fear losing the labels, e.g., 'If I get this wrong, I won't be seen as "clever" any more.' This kind of praise also puts unnecessary significance on natural talent and abilities over working hard to learn new skills, improve and achieve. Plus, it doesn't give the pupils the full picture of what exactly they did well. Rather than 'You aced your spelling test – you're so smart!' go for 'You aced your spelling test – it was a great strategy to use your knowledge of root words to help you spell X and Y.' This lets the pupil know that the strategy they used helped them to get the right answer, and so they will be more likely to apply it to more situations going forward.

Making it stick

Teachers always want the best for their pupils but even the best-made intentions can fall by the wayside when other pressures take over and, before you know it, you can find yourself slipping back into the 'Well done' (Well done for what?) and 'You're so clever' (Does that mean getting things right is most important?). So how can we make a conscious effort to re-focus the praise when this happens?

Prompts for effort-based praise

I really like the way that you...
I admire the way you...
I am pleased with the way you...
I am proud of the way you...

_ was a great idea
This was a great _ to use/choose here
It was really creative how you...
It was very thoughtful how you...
It was a good choice to...
You used a great strategy to...
You were able to use _ really well to...
I like how ambitious you were with...

I love how you continued with _ even when you found _ hard.
You were able to learn from your mistakes
I like how you improved on...

I can see you tried really hard with...
You made an excellent effort with...
You focused clearly on...
I can tell you put a lot of effort into...

You must have worked really hard
I can tell you have been practising
You have made great progress in...
You made a great improvement in...

If in doubt, ask yourself...

Am I praising based on effort or based on getting it right?

Am I giving the pupil a reason for delivering the praise?

Is my praise going to help the pupil feel recognition?

Can the pupil take something away from the praise? e.g., 'It was good to focus carefully and keep concentrating because it meant I could finish all my work and do it well.'