

# Giving Feedback to Kids

*what research tells us about  
the best feedback an adult can give  
to promote social/emotional growth and concern for others*

Educators, coaches, parents... adults who interact with young people are giving feedback all the time. Sometimes it's praise, sometimes criticism; sometimes it's just an observation. Giving feedback that fosters emotional, social, and moral growth and motivation takes the same amount of time and energy as any other kind of feedback, so why not aim for the growth? Essentially, growth-inducing feedback 1) offers information about a performance, 2) focuses on the positive aspects of the performance, and 3) is specific. Two elements to avoid are language that a student perceives as controlling (versus language that is merely informational and encouraging) and a negative focus on the performance. **Positive performance feedback** and **process praise** stand out in research as the most growth-promoting.

## positive performance feedback

**Positive performance feedback** focuses on two things. First, it looks for the positive aspects of something a child does—even if it was generally not done well. If there is anything positive that can be addressed, highlighting the positive induces more growth and motivation to improve than focusing on the negative.

If the negative must be addressed—sometimes this is necessary, especially to help students avoid certain mistakes—it helps to explain the danger involved in making the mistake; the tone should always be one of concern and information rather than negativity or character judgment.

*"When you went to the Principal's office yesterday to complain about the cafeteria, she told me that you asked her if she had a spare minute before you talked. I think that little gesture of showing consideration for her time really helped your conversation. I don't know if she's going to be able to change anything, but I know she left your meeting with a lot of respect for you. Great job!"*

*"I think you did the right thing in standing your ground yesterday when that kid was trying to steal the ball; and I admired you for telling him it was unfair. But as proud as I was, I think it would have turned out better for both if you if you hadn't pushed him. That's when the situation turned worse."*

## process praise

Process praise stands out as a powerful companion to positive performance feedback, especially in Carol Dweck's many studies on **mindset** and resilience. Process praise puts its focus on effort or strategy: "I loved the way you kept at it, you never gave up!" "The first way you tried to solve that problem just wasn't working, but you paused, took another look, and tried it a different way. That's when you met success. Awesome!"

When teachers, coaches, or parents praise effort or strategy ("you've worked so hard" or "that's you, always looking for a new way when an obstacle arises") rather than innate ability or talent ("you're so smart" or "you are such a natural at this") the person receiving the praise for effort or strategy is more motivated to persevere as tasks become more challenging.

Praising **process** tends to encourage autonomous development and nurture self-regulation. Praising inborn skill does nothing to foster competence, even though it may feel good, because its focus is on traits rather than actions. Studies show process praise is much more effective in promoting social and emotional growth.

Both **positive performance feedback** and **process praise** tend to validate the young person's autonomy (they give credit for what the child did, not for who the child is) and they foster competence and confidence.

*For a deeper look at feedback and the research behind these practices, see [heartofcharacter.org](http://heartofcharacter.org)  
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