

PEACE POWER TOOLS

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Verbal Praise

Summary:

Verbal praise is spoken or signed recognition for a person or group's engagement in positive targeted acts or activities. Spoken or signed recognition can be descriptive or a simple form of acknowledgment. There is substantial evidence that verbal praise is both powerful and effective among numerous cultural groups in the United States. Verbal praise is also appropriate for the recognition of cooperation, improvements in social competence, academic engagement, positive parent-child interactions, as well as reductions in disruptive or aggressive behaviors. Ensure that the number of recognition statements exceeds the number of reprimands by at least 4 to 1.

Resources Needed:

None

Implementation Steps:

Verbal praise is appropriate for a variety of settings.

- Identify positive act or activity.
- Individuals or groups that engage in targeted acts or activities receive recognition, which should be immediate, frequent, and enthusiastic. (Recognition for particular acts can be faded over time for maintenance, but overall levels of recognition should remain high.)
- It is important that the person delivering verbal praise to make eye contact with the recipient, which may involve walking up to the youth and calling him/her by name.
- Clearly describe the positive behavior displayed by the youth, which helps the student self-monitor their behavior and alerts other youth to the behavior that is desired.
- Finally, be creative! Use a variety of comments so that youth don't become bored or lose interest, and find ways to make recognition fun.

Variations:

- A program or culture of recognition can be constructed by working with participants to increase levels of mutual verbal recognition.
- Verbal praise can be used to reinforce positive behavior on the playground.
- When school staff organize cooperative games and activities on the playground, then children or youth praise each other daily for positive behavior witnessed on the playground.
- There is also substantial evidence that verbal praise is effective for increasing positive marital relations, improving sales performance in the workplace, and in general enhancing human relationships.
- Opportunities to discuss how one achieved a particular success have proven very reinforcing in many situations, and can serve as an indirect form of recognition.

Rationale and Evidence Base:

There is considerable evidence that verbal praise is effective. In fact, increasing the level of verbal recognition or praise an individual or group receives for pro-social behaviors is linked to dramatic increases in achievement and decreases in problematic behaviors. This interaction can yield dramatic changes in homes, organizations and communities. Research shows that when staff and youth participate in verbal praise, youth experience increases in serotonin and dopamine as well as reductions in threats and hostility. However, it is important to recognize specific acts and not attributes (e.g., "you're a good boy"). The recognition of actions can encourage continued effort, whereas recognition of attributes provides no guidance for action, may support egotism, and may create anxiety over the loss

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of an ascribed positive "label." Research also shows that verbal praise, in particular, may not be appropriate for all cultural groups. Cultural groups and individuals may value various forms of praise. Thus, prior to the establishment of any recognition program, it is important to discuss culturally appropriate forms of recognition with the groups involved.

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