



Information sheet:

The role of attention, encouragement, praise and incentives in positive behaviour and learning

Research has shown that teachers give three to fifteen times as much attention to children's misbehaviour than to positive behaviour. It's not hard to understand why – children and young people who need love (or positive attention, praise and encouragement) ask for it in the most unloving ways!

Praise can increase a child or young person's self-worth and self-confidence and increases positive behaviours.

Children and young people with challenging behaviour need extra amounts of praise and encouragement – they need it more often than most. Those who reject praise need more opportunities to get more praise. You might also need to provide them with motivators, such as stamps or stickers.

- They are likely to have a negative self-evaluation and low self-worth.
- They may not trust adults.
- They are also more likely to overlook praise, particularly if it's delivered in a neutral tone or is vague or infrequent.

Remember, children and young people respond to rewards and encouragement differently. Carefully select and personalise these to the children and young people in your class or centre. Ensure they are age appropriate.

Effectively using praise to promote positive behaviour and learning

- Aim for a 4:1 ratio of positive to negative attention.
- Pinpoint what it is about the behaviour and be specific in your praise – “You've done a good job of ...” rather than “Good job”.
- Don't wait for behaviour to be perfect before praising.
- Praise individual children, as well as all the children or small groups of children.
- Focus on a child's efforts and learning, not just the end result.
- Promote child self-praise, eg, “You must feel proud of yourself for...”
- Balance your praise of academic and social behaviours and remember to praise aspects of a child's personality, such as thoughtfulness or patience, as well as persistence with tasks.
- Use proximity praise – instead of focusing on the child who is disengaged, praise those who are attending to the task and completing their work. (Catch someone being good!)
- Use praise that is not contingent on behaviours, eg, “It is fun working with you”.

Effectively using incentives to promote positive behaviour and learning

1. Identify one or two positive behaviours you want to see more of. These may be contracted to the whole class or centre or set up as individual goals according to children's particular needs.
2. Explain to the class or child which behaviours will result in reward.

3. Select the incentives. Stars and stickers are good motivators for 3-5-year-old children. Older children like to earn points, tickets or chips to trade them in for something they have chosen from a reinforcement menu.
 - The reinforcement menu should be planned in advance with children – it should be specific.
 - Be sure to fulfill your end of the agreement.
 - Always combine tangible rewards with social rewards, such as labeled praise and encouragement.
 - Write on the board the names of children who make a special achievement – either academic or social. This reinforces good behaviour and is a reminder to all of the children of the expected behaviour. Rotate the names so that every child gets mentioned and no-one misses out.

Do:

- identify small steps towards goals and begin by choosing only one or two behaviours to work on
- gradually increase the criteria for the reward (make it challenging)
- choose inexpensive rewards
- involve children in choosing the rewards
- give the reward after the behaviour occurs (first-then)
- recognise that tangible rewards are a temporary measure to help children learn new behaviours. They must be accompanied by social reward (the message that accompanies the reward) so you can soon phase out the tangible rewards.

The difference between a reward and a bribe

You need to be careful that you reward positive behaviour rather than bribe children and young people to behave.

Rewards are given for positive behaviours after they have occurred, eg, “Tom, when you have finished your writing assignment then you can choose the story for me to read”. Bribes are given before the behaviour occurs, eg, “Tom you can choose the story for me to read now if you promise to finish your writing assignment straight after we have read the book”. Rewards for prosocial behaviour, bribes for antisocial behaviour.

Reward ideas

- **Special awards (give occasionally)** and celebrations such as super star, cool dude, playground power, feather in your cap, citizen of the week, award bear to take home for the night, special button or ribbon.
- **Special privileges (give intermittently)** such as lunch with the teacher, choosing a special DVD for the class to watch, line leader, homework pass, computer time, being the teacher’s helper, sitting at the teacher’s desk, choosing their seat for the day.
- **Inexpensive items (give frequently)** such as stamps, play dough, stickers, pencils, surprise notes, points.

Tip

Look at what you can do to make your classroom or centre a stimulating, supportive and well managed learning space where positive behaviour can thrive.

- Build caring relationships with children and young people. Respect what each one brings to the class or centre (from home, their culture and peers). Allow the experiences of the child or young person to be recognised in the classroom or centre.
- Have high expectations of all children and young people (be sure they are achievable).
- He moana pupuke ka ekengia e te waka – a choppy sea can be navigated. Have belief and faith that children and young people can grow and learn new strategies and behaviour.
- Be flexible, adjust the programme and use a range of learning strategies.
- Use a range of interactions – instruction, monitoring, coaching, recognition, feedback, feed-forward and individual and group interactions.
- Anticipate issues, plan and improvise

This information is adapted from the Incredible Years – Teacher programme which provides teachers with strategies to promote positive behaviours in early childhood education centres and schools.

Single, unplanned interventions on their own may not be effective. Identify the behaviour challenges that need to be addressed and come up with a plan.

For best effect, model encouragement and praise consistently across the whole school or early childhood education centre.

For more information about Incredible Years in New Zealand, [click here](#), or visit their [main website](#).