

## WHY WE PRAISE

**(Short answer: we praise to provide social feedback as someone is learning. We pair praise with real reinforcement, to eventually make social interaction reinforcing itself.)**

- **To provide feedback:** Educators (and BCBA's) let a student know exactly what he's making progress on.
- **To mediate time delays:** Suppose Justin is learning the contingency "first walk in the hallway, then get to the playground". We can't deliver the playground at the first moment he walks in the hallway instead of runs. We'd like to reinforce it, though! **As educators**, one asset we usually have with us, is our words.

## HOW WE PRAISE

**(Short answer: By itself, "good job" is meaningless. Instead, we recommend descriptive statements that call attention to the meaningful change the student is experiencing.)**

- **Use descriptive praise:** We never recommend starting only with "good job!" or "that's great!". Instead, we recommend descriptive praise, to specify what was done "well" or what the observer values. ("Wow. I love the way Justin is walking! It helps our class stay safe and get to the playground faster!")
- **Use simpler statements during early learning:** When a child is only learning to talk, you might hear us say "good WALKING!" or smile and pat him on the shoulder and whisper "wow, you're WALKING!". We can team with an SLP or educator to be sure we provide feedback the student is most likely to understand. The BCBA on the team can help to make sure the feedback is valuable to the student.

## FADING OUT OUR PRAISE

**As soon as possible, we replace some of the praise with more natural reinforcers.**

For student Billy, at first he did not find it reinforcing to drop balls into a cause and effect toy. His physical needs made it challenging just to hold a ball. At first toy play sessions were held at snack time, to keep his interest in the toys. In a few weeks, we were able to say "good playing!" and he would smile and grab another ball to put it in. 2 months later, we were able to say "Let's PLAY!" and he would smile and use his walker to navigate to the play bin. The word "PLAY" had become reinforcing because we paired it with praise, tickles, and smiles and our voices. Now, we can even teach harder skills like dressing himself, helping him working hard for 20 minutes at a time with only our words, smiles, and songs.

## This sounds pretty reasonable. Why the controversy?

*The controversy was revived in the 1970's when Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett (1973) published that students who colored with markers, received either an UNEXPECTED or an EXPECTED reward for being a "good player". The students who received the EXPECTED reward spent less time drawing later. This was later called the "overjustification effect".*

- Kohn (1993) used that work as a starting point for a book called Punished by Rewards in which he argues rewards are destroying the overall motivation of society.
- **Subsequent studies:** Over 100 studies investigated this effect.
- **Conclusion:** in general, "reward contingencies do not have pervasive negative effects on general motivation."  
**The REAL point of Lepper et al.?** It can be detrimental to offer in advance, extra rewards for doing something that the person ALREADY ENJOYS DOING at high rates.

**Final Point:** When **appropriate** reinforcers are provided **contingent** on low- or high-interest tasks, they produce positive effects on free choice and motivation. (*References: Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Cameron, Banko, and Pierce, 2001*)