



BY CAROLE S. CAMPBELL

“Good job!” is meant as positive reinforcement. We say it to encourage a repeat of the praised activity. Yet, what exactly do we mean when we say it? More importantly, what does it mean to the student hearing it?

From a behavioral perspective, immediate reinforcement following a desired action encourages repetition of the behavior.

So, does “Good job!” work? Consider the following questions:

1. How do children know what it is they have done well?
2. What does “Good job!” mean to the child who hears it?
3. How does this phrase acknowledge the child’s unique qualities, strengths, and talents?
4. What does “Good job!” say about the child’s effort toward an accomplishment?
5. How does “Good job!” address any improvements made in performing a task?

Answers to these questions indicate that, though “Good job” seems encouraging, the phrase alone does not offer tangible feedback on what “good job” represents. How then do we give positive reinforcement? More useful than “Good job!” is to identify specific praiseworthy aspects of the task performed.

1. How do children know what it is they have done well? “Good job!” does not specify what about the child’s performance is being praised. Suppose a preschool child blurts out that she made “green” while painting. Saying “Good job!” is a poor way to let her know she made an important discovery. However, “You discovered how to make green! What colors did you mix?” asks the child to

think about what she accomplished and how, which builds her cognitive development while recognizing her discovery.


2. What does “Good job!” mean to the child who hears it? Overused, this phrase is not a meaningful response. When a child doesn’t know what he did well, the chances of him repeating the “good job” decrease. “Good job!” becomes white noise; a no longer heard comment which is useless for any purpose intended.

3. How does “Good job!” acknowledge the child’s unique qualities, strengths, and talents? Feedback such as, “You’re so good at building towers! How many blocks have you balanced to build this one?” provides information about a particular strength, which helps build competence. It also introduces the concept of number and balance, along with a subtle challenge to improve on the current effort. “Good job!” misses the point.

4. What does “Good job!” say about the child’s effort toward an accomplishment? Every child has “growing edges,” or those tasks not done so well. Teachers are aware of them. “Good job!” inadequately acknowledges the child’s persistence or extra effort to accomplish a task or develop a particular ability. Phrases such as, “You did it! You worked hard to learn to tie your shoe all by yourself. You worked hard to learn to do that!” recognizes the child’s effort and success.

5. How does “Good job!” address any improvements made in performing a task? “Good job” fails to mention the improvement made. For example, a child just learning to put puzzles together may not have developed a systematic approach to puzzle completion and therefore, does not turn all the pieces right side up before beginning. Suggesting this strategy then helps the child learn and further develop ability.

The most important reason to avoid “Good job!” is because it implies that the teacher is pleased. Children are not put on earth to please us, and besides, pleasing others limits personal development. It deprives the child of evaluating his or her efforts independently. Children who grow up to be “praise junkies” have a difficult time in adult life where praise is rarely given.

To help students develop as independent thinkers, capable of critically evaluating their efforts and determining how a piece of work could be improved, the all-encompassing phrase “Good job!” must be avoided. Students benefit much more from meaningful and sometimes challenging statements regarding progress. They need to hear specific statements about improvements or what needs work and concrete examples of what they are doing well. 



Dr. Campbell holds a doctorate in early childhood education, special education and child development and works as a consultant in these specialties in Tucson, AZ.