

# Children Don't Give a Shit About Praise

*"One Improved Unit" is an original column appearing sporadically, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins.*

A running theme in both peaceful parenting and radical unschooling is that praise and other forms of arbitrary rewards are unnecessary and counter-productive.

Alfie Kohn argued against this practice in "Five Reasons to Stop Saying 'Good Job!'". Others have done likewise. (See The Natural Child Project's archive, as well as other articles by Alfie Kohn.)

In short, arbitrary positive reinforcement, ie. praise and rewards, *not* encouragement and love, conditions children to expect and rely on the praise in order to find value in what they're doing, which has both a manipulative effect and keeps children doing things they really have no interest in.

Take the time to explore the arguments linked above, but here I wanted to look at the relationship between this practice and human action (praxeology), which will lead us to an interesting conclusion (don't look at the title of this post!).

## Human Action

Praxeology is the study of human action. Within this discipline, human action is defined as the purposeful utilization of means over a period of time in order to achieve a desired end. Ends are that which represent a change in the state of affairs in which a person finds himself. This change is only desired because the actor experiences *felt uneasiness* about the original state of affairs. Thus felt uneasiness is the primary motivator of all human action.

## Why People, Including Children, Do Anything

As just explained, the removal of felt uneasiness is the motivation behind every human action (purposeful behavior). What causes the sensation of felt uneasiness? Many different things, some of which depends on the values we hold. Others include physical discomfort, broadly defined. Often these things are of a prospective nature. We anticipate something undesirable happening, feel uneasy about that prospect, and act to prevent or mitigate the effects of it.

I don't see why this is limited to humans. Praxeological analysis has only ever focused on human action because that's what we are and who we're mostly concerned about in social science. But that doesn't mean that *only* humans act, in the praxeological sense. I think

perhaps that all life behaves purposefully by utilizing certain means over a period of time in order to achieve a desired end. The difference may be that some ends are consciously chosen while others are instinctual. A far greater number of ends are chosen consciously among humans, it would seem.

But I digress. Children are human, too, and I believe engage in purposeful behavior. It just so happens that their ignorance on proper means to achieve their desired ends and in the proper utilization of those means is greater than for adults. Therefore their actions seem more irrational and chaotic.

Let us move on.

## **Human Evolution**

When a child acts, his or her goal is the removal of felt uneasiness. What sorts of things create felt uneasiness in children? In my experience as both a former child and as a father to multiple children, a great majority of felt uneasiness is created as a matter of curiosity. Curiosity occurs when one feels uneasy about not having a knowledge of something.

Why the felt uneasiness from ignorance? I think that's mostly instinctual. Humans are naturally very curious, probably as a result of natural selection throughout our evolution as a species. Reproduction followed survival, survival came from learning, and learning came from curiosity. As a matter of evolutionary record, this also included the development of intelligence. I'm sure that's not a coincidence.

In any event, I think I can say with absolute certainty that children are very curious, which means that they feel a great deal of unease about their ignorance, and act to remove it.

## **Activities of Children**

What sorts of activities do children engage in when left alone to do so? They explore the world around them in many different ways using all of their senses. They touch things, listen to things, taste things, look at things, create causes using things just to learn of their effects, eg. intentionally dropping a cup of water on the floor; what a *magnificent* learning experience for a young mind!

Enter adults.

As the natural creator of children, adults are very concerned about the types of activities their children engage in. Adults feel a strong obligation to make sure their children grow up to become responsible, productive, and capable adults. As such, adults are constantly interfering, for good or ill, in the activities of children.

Interference takes many different forms, from the helpful to the manipulative to the

intolerably controlling. Whatever the reason, adults can either be a tool or an obstacle to children trying to achieve their various chosen ends.

## **Praise and Rewards**

As children engage in activity, the adults in their lives often feel it necessary to offer praise for a job well done, or even to go beyond that by offering a reward for the successful completion of a goal.

The purpose of a reward is obvious: the adult desires that the child complete a goal and doesn't believe the child is either interested enough in or is incapable of doing so without the reward. This is a major theme in compulsory forms of education, ie. schooling. Adults believe children won't grow into responsible, productive, and capable adults without completing certain goals (obtaining knowledge, learning skills) created by adults. Whatever the merits of the belief that children need the adults in their lives to set goals for them, rewards for their completion (and punishment for failing to reach completion) are, in the opinions of myself and others (as linked above), completely unnecessary and counter-productive.

Again I digress.

Praise, on the other hand, is something offered after the fact. There isn't usually the promise of praise before a child completes a goal. It's offering seems to be for the same reason, however. The adult is insecure about the child's interest in what he's doing, and so feels the need to offer praise in order for him to continue doing it.

But is the praise really necessary? If the child is acting, it's because the child is trying to remove felt uneasiness, something experienced prior, necessarily, to any action. He's either curious about something or seeking to remove some physical discomfort. Either way, he's already motivated to act, and he does. The praise is unnecessary, as I hope is now clear.

Or in other words, and here's this conclusion restated, *children don't give a shit about praise.*

## **Final Thoughts**

That's not to say that they won't ever give a shit about praise, but when they do, it's because the praise is expected and its reception has become their primary end, in and of itself. Why would this be the case? I can only think of perverse reasons why: they've been raised to value the opinions of others about themselves over their own; they've learned that certain people in their lives will only treat them respectfully or lovingly if they do something praiseworthy; they've come to attach great self-worth to the attainment of praise by

others; *et cetera*. Whatever the case may be, in their natural state children do things for their own reasons and don't give a shit about praise.

In the spirit of being helpful, to the question of, "If I don't praise, then what should I do?" I would answer: Simply ask the question, "Is that fun?" (or similar). This has the effect of reinforcing what the child already believes, that he is indeed having fun, ie. successfully removing their felt uneasiness, or not, in which case the adult can be truly helpful and help the child find proper means to the achievement of his or her desired end. You're most graciously welcome.