Giving Effective Praise
Coaching Guide

Module Summary

In this module, teachers will:
- Explain the purpose of providing praise to acknowledge and reinforce desired behavior(s)
- Identify the criteria for delivering effective praise
- Identify common missteps associated with delivering praise

Module activities:
Teachers learn about characteristics of effective and ineffective praise, and see several examples of each. They also have an opportunity to analyze video of teachers delivering praise in real-life classrooms, and evaluate their effectiveness.

Key Takeaways

Essential knowledge:
In many classrooms, the negative or corrective statements teachers make to students vastly outnumber the positive ones (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011). However, studies have shown that teacher-delivered praise is correlated with increased engagement and a reduction in disruptive behavior (Blaze et al., 2014). In addition, other studies have shown that giving students praise for a positive behavior increases the likelihood that it will continue – both in the short term and the long-term (Strain & Joseph, 2004). All children – and particularly young children – are still developing their social/emotional skills and can benefit from external validation and positive reinforcement (Strain & Joseph, 2004).

Essential skill:
Effective praise generally has these characteristics...
- Specific – Descriptive, and gives precise feedback about what the student did well.
- Contingent – Closely follows the desired behavior, and draws an explicit link to the desired behavior.
- Sensitive – Shows an awareness of the students preferences (e.g. public or private), and is sincere and non-exaggerated.

...and does not have these characteristics:
- Generic – Unspecific and gives no feedback about what the student did well.
- Inflated – Intensity of the praise is disproportionate to the level of effort expended by the student.
- Manipulative – The praise is framed as a verbal reward; the sole purpose of the praise is to manipulate or control behavior.

Essential mindset:
Praising students is an action that can raise academic engagement, reinforce positive behavior, and improve the relationships between teachers and students. When used effectively, praise makes the classroom a more nurturing and supportive place – for everyone.
The Skill in Action

If a teacher gives students frequent praise – and does so effectively – here are some things you might observe:
- The teacher’s praise statements consistently demonstrate the three criteria outlined above (specific, contingent, sensitive).
- The classroom has a generally positive atmosphere. Teacher and students are kind and supportive toward one another.
- Students in the classroom praise one another.
- The level of engagement is high. Students are participating in the class’s activities, and giving their best effort.

If a teacher does not give praise – or does so ineffectively – here are some things you might observe:
- The atmosphere in the classroom feels more negative. The teacher makes significantly more corrective statements to students than positive ones.
- Students in the classroom ridicule one another, or tease classmates when they make a mistake.
- The teacher gives inflated praise for low-level academic work, or low-effort behaviors.
- Students expect verbal praise as a reward, and object if they do not receive it.

NOTE: The effective or ineffective use of praise will probably never be the sole reason for the positive or negative classroom characteristics described above. It is fair to say, however, that the effective or ineffective (or absent) use of praise can play a role in creating these conditions.

Questions for Discussion
The following is a list of suggested questions for engaging in a reflective dialogue with the teacher, either before or after he or she attempts to implement the skill.

- What are the characteristics of effective praise?
- What are the characteristics of ineffective praise?
- Based on the information provided in the module, how would you evaluate your own use of praise?
- Based on the information provided in the module, how could you improve your use of praise?
- Do any of the concepts described in the module feel like they will be easy or challenging to implement? What are they?
- How can I help you master this skill?
- Would you like me to observe your teaching, and give you some feedback on your use of praise?

Coaching Moves

Situation: The teacher expresses a belief in the importance of praise, but the number of negative or corrective statements he/she makes far outnumber the positive ones.

Ask:
- How often would you say you praise your students?
- Do you give individual praise, whole-class praise, or both?
- How do you praise your students? What does praise look/sound like when you do it?
- When you praise your students, how do they typically respond?

Suggest:
- Videotape a typical day of class (e.g. a lesson or class period). Observe how often you praise your students, what it typically sounds like, and how they respond.
- Create some system that you can use to remind yourself to balance praise statements with corrective statements.
- Keep the Giving Effective Praise Resource on your desk to remind yourself of the criteria for effective praise.

Standards

InTASC: 3(n) The teacher is committed to working with learners, colleagues, families, and communities to establish positive and supportive learning environments.