

# Does praise help or hurt your child? What research actually shows

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## SUMMARY

*The podcast episode explores the nuanced impact of praise on children's development, suggesting that while praise is often viewed as a positive reinforcement, it can inadvertently serve as a mechanism of control that shapes children's behavior and self-concept in ways that may not align with their authentic selves. The host delves into the implications of praise, drawing on research and philosophical insights to argue for a shift towards more genuine forms of connection and appreciation that foster children's intrinsic motivation and autonomy.*

- *Praise is evaluative language that can create a conditional relationship between parents and children, leading to dependency on external validation.*
- *Children may internalize praise as a form of social control, shaping their self-concept based on external expectations rather than their own values.*
- *The episode critiques traditional parenting methods that rely on praise, rewards, and punishments, suggesting they may undermine children's intrinsic motivation.*
- *Authentic appreciation and connection are proposed as alternatives to praise, emphasizing the importance of recognizing children's actions and their impact without labeling them.*
- *The host shares personal experiences to illustrate how moving away from praise can foster deeper connections and understanding of children's needs.*
- *The episode highlights cultural differences in expressions of gratitude and the implications for parenting practices.*
- *A free resource with 55 alternatives to praise is offered to help parents support and celebrate their children in more meaningful ways.*
- *Ultimately, the discussion encourages parents to reflect on their motivations for using praise and to seek more authentic ways to connect with their children.*

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Your Parenting Mojo podcast. Many of us might think of praise as a positive force in parenting, a way to build confidence, to encourage good behavior, and to show our love. It's so deeply woven into how we relate to children that it almost seems unquestionable. Of course, we praise them. If you've been around the podcast for a while, maybe you aren't saying good job quite as much as you used to since you've heard here and perhaps in other places that this is not so supportive of children's development.

But perhaps you're still using other kinds of praise because you want to recognize something your child has done well. What could be wrong with that, right? Well, today I want to examine the impact of praise on children and consider this provocative idea. What if praise isn't just a way to lift children up, but also a subtle mechanism to shape them, to control them, often in ways that we ourselves might not even recognize? What if praise is less

about celebrating who children are and more about guiding them toward who we or maybe our society or both want them to become? And what if the ways that we praise them might actually lead them away from values we genuinely care about?

In this episode, we'll explore research on how praise affects children's self-concept, which is the way a child thinks about themselves based on their own ideas and other people's actions toward them, as well as their motivation and their behavior. We'll reflect on our own experiences with praise, what we were praised for, what we learned to value about ourselves, and how that shaped our identities. And we'll draw in ideas from philosopher Michelle Fuko to examine praise as a tool of power that subtly teaches children to internalize social norms and regulate their own behavior. This can be useful to us as parents in the short term, but it can also backfire in ways we don't anticipate in the long term. This isn't about blaming parents. Far from it. I'm exploring these ideas through this episode right alongside you. I worked through five drafts as I wrestled with these concepts. Ultimately, I'm creating this episode for myself as much as for you. I want to understand how power dynamics manifest in my relationship with my daughter, even when they're hard for me to see. I hope that this exploration will help us to relate to our children in more authentic ways, to help them be more fully themselves.

I've also created a free resource to help you do just this. It's a list of 55 ways to support, encourage, and celebrate your child without praising them. You can find that on the episode page for this episode. Just search 245, episode number 245 at your [parentingmojo.com/ep](https://parentingmojo.com/ep). So, let's begin our conversation by clarifying what exactly praise is because sometimes we're praising our children without even realizing it. So praise is evaluative language that judges a person's actions, character, or creations as good or bad.

It often includes words like good, great, excellent, smart, talented, or phrases like I'm so proud of you. Here are some common examples that you might recognize. So when your toddler eats vegetables, you're such a good eater. When your preschooler shares with a friend, I'm so proud of you for sharing the toy. When your child puts away their own toys, good job cleaning up. When your child draws a picture, that's beautiful. When your child brings home good grades, you're so smart. The key distinction between praise and other responses is the intention behind it. If you're primarily offering positive words to encourage your child to repeat a behavior in the future, that is praise. And this is where many of us encounter a subtle trap. We praise our children because we want them to repeat behaviors that make our lives easier or that align with our values. We want them to continue eating nutritious foods, putting their toys away, being kind to others, and succeeding academically. Praise seems like the gentlest, most positive way to encourage these behaviors. After all, what's the alternative? Many of us grew up with parents who use punishments, threats, or harsh criticism to shape our behavior. They might have said, "If you don't eat your vegetables, no dessert."

Or, "Clean up your room or you won't get screen time for the rest of the week." Although, of course, back then it was just TV. Or maybe they said, "Stop fighting over that toy or I'll take it away so neither of you can have it." Most of us know we don't want to parent that way, even if those words sometimes escape our mouths on particularly challenging days when our child's behavior is especially frustrating. So if we want to get vegetables eaten, rooms clean, toys shared instead of fought over, prey seems like a kinder, more gentle approach to make

that happen. Parenting books advise us to catch them being good. Water the flowers, not the weeds, and focus on the positive. And compared to hitting timeouts or removing what we call privileges, it can indeed be an improvement. But here's the problem.

When we use praise as a tool to get our children to repeat behaviors we want to see, we're still focused on controlling them, just with a sweeter voice and a smile. We are still in the role of judge and evaluator, determining what's good and bad, what's worthy of our approval and what isn't. Non-violent communication trainer Tom Bond explains that praise functions as a label we use to get people to behave in certain ways. It's a tool for control, even if it's a slightly gentler tool than punishment. When we say, "Good job putting your toys away," what we're really communicating is, "I approve of this behavior, and I want you to do it again to keep earning my approval." And children quickly learn to read between the lines. They understand that our praise is conditional. It appears when they do what we want, and it vanishes when they don't.

I want to just briefly look at what the research tells us about the effects of praise on children because we covered this in my conversation with Alfie Conn. He wrote the book *Punished by Rewards* and he strongly opposes praise. In my conversation with him, I began from journalist Melinda Wery's perspective. She wrote an article for *Slate* magazine called *Go Ahead Rewards on Your Child*, arguing that rewards are not especially harmful to children. One of the main points in her article challenges a key study often cited by the anti-reward camp. Dr. Edward Deci first taught students how to solve puzzle games and then paid some participants to play and later asked all of them to continue without payment. The students who were paid spent more time on puzzles when money was offered but stopped after the incentive disappeared. Moyer points out that the drop in intrinsic motivation wasn't statistically significant, meaning it might have occurred by chance. and Deci selected puzzles he thought students would find intrinsically rewarding. But what parent needs to motivate a child to do something they already enjoy doing? Some subsequent research found that rewards reliably increase time spent on unappealing tasks and that quote rewarded people are not less willing to work on activities and they do not display a less favorable attitude toward tasks than people who do not receive rewards. End quote. Moyer argues that while rewards might initially be needed to get a child to comply, behaviors can eventually become habitual. She describes her experience. My husband and I started rewarding our son every time he put his dirty clothes in the hamper.

At first, we had to remind him daily that doing it would earn him a reward, and then he started doing it and asking for his reward. But after a month or so, we stopped reminding. He stopped asking for rewards and we stopped finding dirty clothes on the floor. End quote. I don't want to dwell too long on this aspect of the research because it's one of those topics that's been studied extensively from multiple angles and we can find research supporting both positions. There's plenty of it showing that rewards do undermine children's intrinsic motivation to learn and be creative and equally substantial evidence suggesting that they don't. For me, the much more interesting question isn't whether praise works to change behavior in the short term. It's actually what Moyer inadvertently illustrates perfectly that praise serves as a mechanism to control our children.

And this deeper function is the purpose of our episode today. In my conversation with Alfie Conn, he observed, quote, "The more focused we are on obedience, whether it's clothes in the hamper or homework done on time,

the more likely we are to use either bribes or threats, rewards or punishments. Rewards and praise are just sugar-coated control. Even if we dress it up with terms like positive reinforcement, it's still fundamentally about control. End quote. When we praise children, we establish a conditional relationship where our approval depends on their actions. The underlying message becomes, I'm excited about you when you do what I want. Alfie Cohen shared this profound insight during our conversation. The message they send children, meaning rewards, is your approval, attention, acknowledgement, and love have strings attached. You have to do this to get that. You've got to put the clothes in the hamper. You've got to get good grades. You've got to be well behaved.

You've got to share your toys. You've got to try your best at sport. You've got to do something in order for me to get excited about you. And that is the opposite of what children need to flourish. What they need from us is not just acceptance or love. It's to be loved and accepted for who they are, not for what they do. And it's not just that we have to believe that we love them unconditionally. That is irrelevant. Is that they have to experience it that way. End quote. This concept that the child's experience matters more than our intentions can be really challenging to grasp. We parents might think, well, I love my child, so of course they feel loved. Or I spend so much time with my child. they can't possibly be acting out because they need connection. But if your child doesn't perceive that love or that connection, then our perception becomes secondary. And I want to do a little thought experiment to get this idea across. So just consider for a moment how you prefer your partner to connect with you. Perhaps you value deep conversation about meaningful topics or feeling truly understood even during disagreements or maybe receiving a foot massage after an exhausting day. How often does your partner actually engage in these connection behaviors? Perhaps less often than you would prefer. Now, what does your partner find connecting?

It's likely different from your preferences. What happens when your partner does the things that they find connecting, but you don't? Those gestures probably don't land for you in a meaningful way. Here's a personal example. My husband's family gets much of their connection needs met simply by occupying the same general space, not even engaging directly. If they're in the same house, not even necessarily in the same room, they feel connected. My husband feels connected by watching a movie sitting next to me. For me, that doesn't register as genuine connection.

We're both staring at a screen. So, the movie watching meets his needs, but not mine. Do you see how that works? Just because one person emerges from an interaction with their needs satisfied doesn't mean that both parties experience the same fulfillment. When we praise our child, we might feel good about the interaction, but they may not. And even if they do enjoy receiving praise, that enjoyment might have complex implications. Let's think about how praise influenced our development. Were you praised frequently when you were growing up?

What kind of behaviors or qualities earned adult approval? How did receiving praise make you feel? Many parents I work with excelled academically and enjoyed the validation that came with good grades and teacher recognition. They describe the warm glow of being labeled smart or talented, the pride they felt when bringing home impressive report cards, and how praise gradually became a fundamental marker of their worth and

identity. I was a great student. I graduated second in my high school class. I consistently got A's. Although it wasn't that hard in a school where most kids didn't really value academic achievement. I did it quietly and didn't make a spectacle of it cuz even I eventually realized it wasn't cool to be the kid constantly raising their hand with the answers. Academic success served two purposes for me. I was so unhappy at home. I spent most of my time in my room avoiding interactions with my stepmom. And school work provided a productive distraction. In many ways, I was seeking acceptance through academic praise because I wasn't getting much emotional connection at home. The praise that I received through grades felt gratifying in the moment. But it also created a dependency. I became reluctant to attempt things I wasn't already good at. What if I didn't get praise? Even worse, what if I got criticism instead?

My real academic talent wasn't actually doing the work, but deciphering exactly what the teachers wanted to award an A. and I would deliver precisely that rather than taking creative risks or sharing ideas that might have been different from what I thought the teachers wanted to hear. This is where perfectionism often emerges. Many parents I work with describe themselves as perfectionists or recovering perfectionists. When we examine this tendency more deeply, we discover that perfectionism isn't really about maintaining high standards. It's fundamentally about fear. Fear that if we're not perfect, we won't be valued or loved.

Perfectionism functions as a protective mechanism. We believe and hope that if we achieve perfection, we'll win praise, approval, and love from our parents. If a child believes they have to work hard to get that praise, approval, and love, then they will work incredibly hard to do it without failing. And if they fail to receive praise, approval, and love, then they very often conclude the fault is with them, that there must be something wrong with them. Think about your relationship with praise as an adult. If you believe you've performed well at something, like delivering a presentation at work or preparing a special meal and nobody acknowledges it, how do you feel? Many of us experience disappointment, hurt, or even resentment when our efforts aren't acknowledged. We might feel insecure about our work until someone validates it. Or perhaps we grow resentful of our children for being ungrateful because they don't thank us even though they may express appreciation in ways that feel meaningful to them, like physical affection. These reactions suggest that we've developed a dependency on external validation. The very same dependency we risk creating in our children when we rely heavily on praise. This dependency directly influences our parenting. When our child doesn't verbalize gratitude after something we've done for them, we might initially interpret that as feeling unappreciated or disrespected. But if we look a little more closely, we realize unappreciated and disrespected aren't actually feelings. They're judgments. If we use the feelings list at [yourparenting.com/feelings](http://yourparenting.com/feelings), we might recognize that beneath these judgments lies the authentic emotion of hurt. Our reaction often stems from our own unmet need for validation. We might also worry that we're raising children who won't succeed socially because they lack necessary manners. But that's often just the surface level worry that our deeper hurt hides underneath. Given our personal histories with praise, it's understandable that we might feel triggered when our own children don't express gratitude for our efforts. We might find ourselves saying things like, "After all I've done for you," or, "I worked so hard making this dinner and you didn't even say thank you." When we require verbal expressions of gratitude from our children, we're essentially soliciting their praise. We want them to validate our parenting efforts, just as we once sought validation from our own parents. Understanding this connection helps to explain why moving away from praise feels so uncomfortable for many parents. If praise constituted the currency of love in our childhood, it can feel incredibly uncomfortable not to offer that same currency to our children. We

might worry, if I don't praise my child, how will they know I love them? These questions reveal how profoundly our own experiences shape our parenting instincts. If we grow up in environments where praise was scarce, we might overcompensate by praising our children excessively. If we thrived on praise as children, it might represent one of our primary expressions of love and approval for our own children.

Perhaps when we recognize these passions, we can develop healthier ways to meet our needs for validation through adult relationships or our own internal sense of accomplishment. But this self-awareness doesn't address the fundamental reasons why we praise our children, which is because we want them to succeed in society. When we praise them for social niceties, sharing with peers, academic achievement, we're essentially training them to function successfully within particular social frameworks. And I can imagine that some folks listening are thinking, "But I want my children to have good manners."

It embarrasses me when they don't say please and thank you in public. And someday it could mean they can't achieve everything I want them to because they haven't used the right manners because I haven't taught them the right manners and they will fail and it will be my fault. Similar reasoning applies to sharing behaviors and academic performance. We want our children to master these behaviors because we believe they'll enhance our children's lives. And we have to acknowledge these behaviors also make our experience as parents more manageable. When children help with chores, we get practical help.

When they share with friends instead of grabbing toys, we avoid the super uncomfortable calls from school about aggressive behavior. When they earn good grades, we're spared difficult conversations with teachers, advocating for help for our child, possibly financing tutors, and the persistent worry about how they'll manage in the future. When we catastrophize like this, we envision all the negative consequences that might unfold if we don't correct these behaviors immediately. And I do want to acknowledge that our expectations around appreciation and behavior are deeply embedded in cultural norms. In North American and many European societies, we place tremendous emphasis on verbal expressions of gratitude. We teach children to say please when asking for something and thank you when receiving it. These verbal exchanges have become so normalized we often judge both children and adults who don't use them as impolite or ungrateful. But this approach to gratitude is not universal. In episode 42, how to teach a child to use manners, we discovered that anthropologists have documented fascinating variations in how gratitude shows up across cultures. In some communities, explicitly saying please and thank you for everyday interactions actually signals social distance rather than politeness. The underlying reasoning is profound. If we share a genuinely close relationship with someone, why would we need to formally request their help or thank them for providing it?

There are some countries in southern Europe where the translation of please into the local language is apparently a term that connotes begging and is seen to be rude. Within close relationships, it's assumed, "Of course, we're going to help each other." So, adding a please to a request would seem peculiar or even offensive. In Japanese culture, gratitude is often expressed through reciprocity and anticipating others' needs rather than verbal acknowledgement. The concept of ongoing gratitude creates a continuous cycle of giving and receiving that strengthens social bonds without necessarily requiring explicit thanks for each individual act of kindness. Cultural messages become much more visible when we're looking at societies different from our own.



There's a remarkable short documentary called *Instruments of a Beating Heart* that's available on the New York Times website. The film was directed by Emma Ryan Yamazaki and it follows first graders in a Japanese public elementary school. They're learning to play orchestral parts of Beth Hovven's *Ode to Joy* for a ceremony welcoming new students. In the film, a girl named Aami struggles to master the rhythm for her symbols part. She seems deeply concerned about letting the group down. She cries quietly by herself when she makes mistakes. Nobody scolds her. She has internalized the expectation she has to perform as a reliable part of the collective. Perseverance itself is considered virtuous and expected. So there's no suggestion that she might be reassigned to a different role. The teachers and the other students support her not so AM can excel individually, but so the entire group can perform effectively. They're helping her internalize social norms by expressing confidence that she will fulfill her responsibilities. The needs of the incoming students, the performers, and the school community collectively outweigh AM's individual preferences. Success is defined as contributing to the group and maintaining social harmony by playing the symbols at precisely the right moment for the whole group to sound good. Eurocentric cultural contexts operate quite differently. When you think about it, our children receive a lot of contradictory messages. They should pursue individual achievement, express their uniqueness and distinguish themselves. Ideally, we adults should provide learning activities that are intrinsically motivating to the individual child rather than teaching the child to serve collective goals. We want our children to feel proud of their accomplishments while avoiding shame, which is perceived as psychologically harmful. Yet, simultaneously, we want them to be intrinsically motivated by school work that the vast majority of people would and do find boring. We want them to distinguish themselves so they get one of those few spots in a good university, but we discourage them from standing out too much, especially if they're girls. A girl who directs other children is often labeled bossy, while a boy exhibiting the exact same behavior is more likely to be described as strong willed or a leader. Episode 159 explored girls relational aggression where girls who deviate from norms by assertively sharing opinions can become targets of exclusion and rumor spreading. Linguist Dr. Robin Leoff argues that many girls and women learn communication techniques like hedging, which means using phrases such as sort of, kind of, or I guess. They use tag questions, so adding a question to a statement. It's cold today, isn't it?

and rising intonation at the end of phrases that transform statements into questions. These speech patterns convey uncertainty and diminished authority, making girls appear less threatening, although this research did primarily study white middle-class American women and may not apply universally. Girls navigate an especially narrow acceptable range, and various social forces demonstrate these boundaries. Parents and teachers reinforce them by praising girls for displaying dependent, nurturing, affectionate behavior while encouraging boys toward physical activities and mathematical concepts. Peer groups reinforce boundaries by excluding girls who don't play nicely and defer to boys directions. Boys, of course, face their own complicated challenges because they too have a deep need for love and affection from their parents. But openly seeking emotional connection is often perceived as feminine. We've discussed this extensively in previous episodes, including episode 50 on raising emotionally healthy boys and episode 161 on new masculinities for older boys. I think it's also important to note that Dr. Diana Bowring, who studied parenting approaches that later became the parenting styles framework, stopped studying what she called harmonious parenting because the sons of the two mothers employing it displayed what she characterized as epheminite traits. She didn't say what behaviors she was describing as effeminate, but we can imagine perhaps they were things like asking for a mother's love and affection. So now I want to go one level deeper to look at implications of praise on the relationship between

parents and children itself, which I think is the most important part of this discussion.

When we look past whether or not praise gets children to put their clothes in the hamper and whether it disrupts their intrinsic motivation, we discover something profound about how praise shapes children's relationship with authority and their own autonomy. And I'm going to use philosopher Michelle Fuko's concept of normalizing judgment to look at this. So Fuko says that praise functions as more than just emotional encouragement or behavioral reinforcement. At a deeper level, praise operates as a form of social control, which aligns with the ideas that I've been developing throughout this episode.

When we praise children for certain behaviors, good sharing, nice listening, excellent manners, we're teaching them what society values and expects. We're defining what's normal and what's desirable. There's nothing inherently problematic about teaching children cultural norms. My concern arises when praise becomes a way that children internalize our surveillance. And this means they know we're watching them. So they act in a certain way to get our approval. Eventually they stop looking for our approval because they've taken on maybe our values and a lot of the wider cultures values as well as their own values. They begin monitoring themselves according to external standards rather than developing their own internal value system.

FCO developed his ideas on surveillance after studying English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon. This was a circular prison with an observation room at the center that prisoners couldn't see into. So the inmates never knew if they were being observed and this meant the prisoners would instead monitor themselves continuously, making the prison nearly self-regulating and therefore super cheap to operate. Fuko recognized that similar dynamics operate in everyday life. We constantly monitor our behavior, wondering who might be observing, what judgments are they forming. Eventually, through a process that we tend to call socialization in young children, we no longer require external observers to monitor us. We've internalized the judging gaze. Some parents I work with experience this self-consciousness even in their own homes, attempting to shape their children's behavior out of concern for judgment of their child or their performance as a parent might come in the future.

You might notice this happening when your child asks, "Is this good?" after they create artwork, or did I do that right after they do a task that's more for them than it is for you. These questions reveal they're already looking outside themselves for validation rather than developing their own standards and values. And this self-monitoring tendency can stay with us into adulthood. How many of us still hear our parents evaluative voices and our thoughts judging our choices? How many of us reflexively ask, "What would mom think of this?" when making decisions. How many discover that when triggered by our children's behavior, we hear our parents' voice, particularly our mother's voice, emerging from our own mouths. This internalized authority figure is exactly what Fuko describes.

We can link FCO's ideas to research on self-determination theory which helps us to see on a step-by-step basis how we develop motivation to do specific tasks. The first stage is external regulation where a behavior is entirely controlled by outside forces like rewards and punishments. This appears when your child eats their vegetables only to earn dessert, cleans their room to avoid losing screen privileges, puts their clothes in the



hamper to get a reward. You'll recognize this stage when your child asks, "What will I get if I clean up?" or immediately stops helping once they get their reward. Next comes introjected regulation where external control has been partially internalized. At this stage, your child thinks, "I should brush my teeth because I'm supposed to do it or mom will be disappointed if I don't set the table or put my clothes in the hamper." The behavior occurs out of obligation or to avoid guilt, not because the child perceives inherent value in it. You'll observe this when your child says things like, "I'm being good, right?" or "Are you happy with me now?" Sometimes these questions will be asked non-verbally, like when they look at you in a questioning way to ask if you approve of what they've done. The final stage is integrated regulation, where behavior becomes fully aligned with the person's own values and self-concept.

Your child might think, "I help set the table because in our family, we all contribute to making meals happen together. That's an important part of who we are." At this stage, the behavior reflects the child's identity and core values. You'll notice this when your child takes initiative without prompting and can articulate why certain actions matter to them personally. Praise can artificially accelerate children along this developmental sequence before they're ready. They initially perform actions solely because they receive praise. They learn that continued praise follows continued compliance. And as they move toward introjected regulation, we might praise them for that transition as well, for brushing their teeth without a fight. They continue progressing toward integrated regulation, likely still receiving some praise, although perhaps less effusive than during earlier stages. And some parents might hear this developmental sequence and think, "Yes, that is what I want. I'm willing to offer rewards initially, but ultimately I want my child to internalize these values so I don't have to praise them anymore. I want them to become intrinsically motivated. And I want to pause here for a second because that term intrinsically motivated is often really misunderstood. Intrinsic motivation means engaging in an activity because the action itself provides satisfaction. It does not mean performing a task without external rewards. Some individuals genuinely find organizing and tidying to be intrinsically motivating because they enjoy the process. However, most people are extrinsically motivated by the outcomes which might be having an organized environment, self-administered rewards, or recognition from others. So, just to reiterate, if your child is intrinsically motivated to do something, it does not mean they will do it without you praising them or without being asked. So unless they enjoy the process of cleaning or brushing their teeth, they will likely never be intrinsically motivated to do those things. We used to praise children much more generally than we're told to do it now. When I was growing up in the UK, parents would use really broad affirmations like good girl or good boy to praise the child as a whole rather than the specific thing that they did.

We moved away from that because we realized children could end up believing that their entire person was good or not good depending on our judgment. And then we moved into good job particularly in the US to avoid the harmful whole person judgment. But eventually we realized that good job still takes the focus away from the child's own experience and doesn't tell them what specific aspect of their behavior we're approving of. Current parenting advice advocates for behavior specific praise or BSP. Instead of generic good job, we're supposed to say, "I noticed how you shared your toys with your sibling without being asked." We're employing this statement as positive reinforcement specifically intended to increase the likelihood of the behavior recurring. We can also analyze BSP through Fuku's theoretical framework. To deliver effective BSP, parents have to closely observe children's behavior, creating a situation where children recognize their undervaluation even before praise occurs. By praising specific behaviors, parents signal what constitutes normal or desirable conduct,

directing children toward particular behavioral standards.

BSP inherently establishes categories of praiseworthy and not praiseworthy behaviors with one classification clearly preferable. The challenge with this is we're once again trying to push children through that framework of external to introjected to integrated regulation. We might praise a child for finishing their dinner, but what if they weren't hungry anymore when their plate was only half empty? We're getting them to take on a value that plates must be cleaned even if they aren't hungry. When we praise them for sitting quietly, they learn to override their innate need for movement and play. That happened to us, too, which is why so many of us adults rarely move for fun. We only do it because we think we should do it, and we call it exercise. When we praise a child for listening, they learn that adults directions should be followed, even when they have needs of their own that won't be met by following our directions. When we say things like, "You're so brave for not crying." or you're such a big kid for not making a fuss. We teach them to suppress their emotions rather than communicating them.

When we praise them for sleeping by themselves, they learn to deny their needs for connection and comfort. Praise communicates the thing you're doing is valuable to me, so you should keep doing it whether or not your needs are met as well. This is why the only praise we offer to other adults is people who are supposed to be underneath us in a power structure like employees. We don't ever praise anyone who's our equal or our superior because they wouldn't allow it.

That's why praise can seem so condescending when we're on the receiving end of it because it inherently communicates that we're in the inferior position and the other person wants to shape us to make things easier for them. This is what fuko helps us to recognize that when children internalize our ideas about what's important, they are inherently learning to ignore their own ideas. They're learning to monitor themselves according to our criteria. This internalized surveillance might look like integrated regulation.

Your child might even say, "I clean my room because I like it organized." But if they're actually cleaning because they've internalized your voice and standards, they haven't truly developed autonomy. They've simply relocated the external control mechanism inside of themselves. In academic literature, this internalization process is often portrayed positively. Belgian researchers Bart Sonins and Martin Vansteijnsta examined four response patterns adolescence show when they perceive that their parents are trying to control them by doing things like strictly enforcing rules, threatening punishments, carrying out punishments, removing privileges, and using conditional rewards like privileges and praise as incentives for behaviors like cooperation and household contributions.

They also used psychological control tactics like inducing guilt or temporarily withdrawing affection. So these four responses that the teens were using were firstly oppositional defiance. So directly rejecting parental authority potentially leading to aggression. The second is compulsive compliance. So simply submitting to demands which can produce anxiety. The third is negotiation questioning rules and suggest suggesting alternatives. And finally, accommodation, mentally finding personal meaning in parental directives. The researchers categorized the first two responses as non-autonomous, while they said that the second two are autonomous responses, which they say are better for children.

These controlling approaches represent conventional parenting for many families. University of Michigan research found that 80% of parents of young children have threatened to leave locations to encourage better behavior. 85% have threatened to confiscate toys or electronics. Approximately 38% of parents in an Ontario preschool study reported occasionally withdrawing affection as a disciplinary strategy. And we can imagine the percentage of parents willing to admit using that strategy in a survey is probably less than the number who are actually using it. The research characterizes teens oppositional defiance as non-autonomous and therefore problematic. In other words, refusing to do what your parents say is pathological. It means there's something wrong with the teen, and there's no possibility there might be something wrong with the parents request. It's possible you are one of those teens who submitted to your parents demands who now doesn't know how to understand that you have needs. We can imagine how parents who set rules don't usually want those rules to be questioned. If they were open to negotiation, they wouldn't be called rules.

Accommodating parents demands by looking for ways to find personal meaning in them is deemed a healthy response to controlling behavior. Now, just imagine, I don't know, a certain political leader whose position you disagree with, who's been setting rules that go against your values? How could looking for personal meaning in their words and their rules be any kind of a positive response? The same research describes quote unquote autonomy supportive parenting as producing better outcomes than controlling parenting. But this framework still incorporates parental structure. The parent is to provide this structure by quote acknowledging the adolescent perspective or providing a rationale for decisions end quote rather than using guilt or threats. Just think for a minute about how this would function in an adult relationship.

Right? Imagine a partner who validates your feelings with, "Yes, I understand why you're angry about not attending the party, but you still can't go." Or one who explains, "Uh, because I don't know the attendees and I'm concerned for your safety." The approach establishes parental authority as legitimate by default. Children's resistance is portrayed as inappropriate by default. From FCO's perspective, this is how the child internalizes their parents external control mechanisms. When teens accommodate parental demands, they're essentially persuading themselves that the requirements are meaningful rather than imposed. The researchers celebrate this as positive because it allows adolescence to stay true to themselves.

That's a quote, while complying with parental expectations. This is a prime example of what Fuko calls self-regulation. The most effective social control occurs when individuals believe they're acting freely while actually conforming to external expectations. It assumes that parental authority is natural and necessary. It defines healthy development as conformity to social expectations. If the child resists, the resistance is a problem rather than being a legitimate expression of developing autonomy. I'm reminded of Dr. John Wall's work advocating for children's voting rights, which he suggests should be available whenever a child expresses interest. Adults don't face competency tests to vote. Children don't magically become competent on their 18th birthday.

If we wouldn't dictate an adult's choices, do we abruptly stop controlling adolescence when they turn 18? If no magical transformation occurs on that single day, rendering them suddenly deserving of autonomy, is there a reason we couldn't or shouldn't begin respecting their agency earlier? I'm not suggesting children should do

whatever they want. Far from it. But consider what genuinely supportive parenting might look like in these kinds of situations. Rather than, "I know you're excited about the party. You can't attend because I don't know anyone there." Which validates feelings, provides reasoning, but it still maintains control. We might say something like, "I hear your excitement about the party. I'm concerned because I don't know anyone attending. I want to ensure your safety. How could we address my need for your safety while also allowing you to attend?"

This approach acknowledges our legitimate needs while exploring solutions that respect both perspectives. Research consistently identifies authoritative parenting as the most effective of the four classic styles. But how plausible is it that only four parenting approaches exist and that we couldn't develop something better than control disguises autonomy support? Even if you're not parenting adolescence yet, you probably still see similar dynamics with your younger children.

Does your toddler resist doing what you ask? Do they sometimes flatly refuse to listen? Do you praise them when they do listen? The underlying dynamics remain similar across the developmental stages. A meta analysis of 19 studies on child compliance found that timeouts, verbal reprimands, and briefly ignoring non-compliance effectively increase children's compliance. while praise showed inconsistent effectiveness. The researchers went on to say that quote, "Praise tends to be perceived as positive but also as controlling because praise is contingent upon specific behavior only. Thus, praise can yield both positive and negative effects depending on the precise wording to whom it is provided and the context." End quote. The analysis focused exclusively on immediate and short-term effects from minutes to weeks, acknowledging that some parents might prioritize longerterm goals like strengthening the parent child relationship. It's not super surprising that timeouts and reprimands and strategic ignoring can modify children's behavior. We looked at those strategies in our timeout episodes. We typically interpret children's resistance as defiance. But what if we reframed this understanding?

Researcher Elizabeth Gershoff, who is known for her extensive work on physical punishment, studied toddler's reactions to maternal control. Her paper begins by asserting that quote compliance with parents is critical to child development. End quote. And new quote, comp non-compliance is often considered a marker for poor parent child relationships. End quote. Doesn't seem like a super promising start to this paper, but the findings were more nuanced. Her team designed an experiment where mothers played with their children while preventing them from playing with certain superattractive toys and then instructed the children to clean up. The interactions were recorded and analyzed in detail. Children complied with their mother's requests only about onethird of the time. They failed to comply 51% of the time. So if your child shows similar patterns, you are not alone. Among the non-compliant responses, 43% of children simply ignored the request.

43% represented simple refusals. So they would shake their head or say no without any emotional intensity. 14% were categorized as defiant. So refusing with anger, crying, tantrums, or doing the opposite of what the parent had asked. In the remaining 17% of interactions, mothers physically enforced the children's compliance. Children who willingly complied typically had mothers who demonstrated supportiveness during the play session. Surprisingly, children exhibiting defiance also had mothers who were supportive and encouraged autonomy.

Highly defiant children researchers term actually initiated more positive interactions with their mothers than low defiant children. The researchers concluded that in early development, the toddler years, children's defiance may not indicate poor parenting or strained relationships, but instead reflects healthy autonomy development among toddlers. Defiance demonstrates motivation to control their environment, an emerging sense of independence, active participation in social interactions, and healthy assertiveness.

Simply ignoring parents is a pattern more commonly observed in children of depressed mothers who struggle to respond sensitively to their children's cues. The study did have limitations. Predominantly white middle-class participants, a lab setting where children might not behave like they do at home, and a complete absence of fathers. But if we accept these findings, they have profound implications for our parenting approach. Defiance among toddlers is not necessarily problematic. If we're rewarding compliance with praise and punishing non-compliance, we may inadvertently be discouraging an important developmental process. If instead we interpret resistance as an expression of underlying needs, we can discover ways to meet both our needs and theirs. Establishing this pattern early likely results in less adversarial interactions as children mature. It's possible that children's later defiance beyond the toddler years becomes problematic because they're digging in on using the only tools that have worked to help them get their needs met up to this point. The more the child's needs still aren't met, the more problematic their behavior gets. Understanding children's needs in this way remains relatively uncommon in mainstream parenting. Most parents who participate in academic studies aren't going to be using these ideas. So when researchers study 3 to 5-year-olds using passive resistance, they're probably looking at a child whose parents have been using praise as rewards and various punishments like privilege removal for some time. By this stage, children have learned that active defiance typically results in punishment. They resist passively because they recognize that the parents request conflicts with their needs, but they don't have effective tools to articulate this in a way the parent can receive. And because many parents don't fully understand the concept of needs either, they may not fully understand their own motivations for making requests. They ask children to comply primarily to meet their own needs for ease, for harmony, for cooperation. But there are so many other ways for parents to meet those needs.

I'll share another example. I asked my daughter Caris to start making her own lunch when she was about eight. And she expressed willingness in principle when we talked about it. When it actually came down to making the lunch, she would end up running off to her room in tears. And so I made her lunch a couple days in a row. And it was so confusing to me because she's eight, right? She's physically capable of assembling food in a container. She regularly prepares food for herself on weekends without any problems.

So after a few frustrating days, we sat down together to figure out what was happening. And we discovered that preparing food during hectic weekday mornings was significantly different for her from doing this at her own pace on weekends. She found it overwhelming to determine what she wanted to eat, figure out whether it was available, and find the items in our crowded fridge in the mornings when there was some time pressure to leave the house. Without understanding my needs in this situation, my options are limited.

Perhaps I can create a menu of pre-approved choices, many of which wouldn't end up being available in any particular day. I might praise her when she successfully made her lunch. There might be consequences when she

didn't. Maybe a natural consequence. Kind of natural, right? If you don't prepare lunch, you don't have anything to eat today. But by recognizing each of our needs, we can find a path that work for both of us. I acknowledge my need for predictable morning routines. I don't want to discover 10 minutes before a coaching call that today was a day when I was going to make her lunch. I also value raising a competent child with practical life skills. Her needs were for ease and mental space. Lunch preparation felt overwhelming when she was barely awake in the mornings. And the strategy we came up with together was that she would instead unload the dishwasher while I would prepare her lunch. Dishwasher duty requires minimal cognitive effort from her. I don't mind making her lunch as long as I know it's coming and I can allow time for it. She is still contributing to the household functioning and I know she's capable of preparing lunch because she does it on weekends. We found a way to meet both of our needs and the conflict disappeared. The essential insight here is recognizing her resistance not as defiance, not as problematic behavior to be corrected, but as communicating her needs. Caris typically expresses distress through tears. Other children might employ mean language, physical aggression, or comply while displaying obvious resentment like stomping around. Just imagine if she had managed to prepare her lunch despite these challenges. If I wanted to reinforce this behavior, I might praise her accomplishment. Ethist Dr. Hannah McHugh describes this as what she calls oppressive praise. Praise that reinforces existing power dynamics between the praise-giver and the recipient. Behaviorists say praise is just reinforcement, which means consequences that make the behavior more likely to be repeated. But McHugh says it's much more than that. McHugh says praise represents an exercise of authority that defines what qualities deserve recognition in a child's behavior. This process of defining what deserves recognition reinforces social norms that communicate and perpetuate social expectations. When we praise girls for household helpfulness, for meal preparation, for emotion regulation, for prioritizing others needs over their own, we are using oppressive praise.

When we praise boys for leadership, for physical resilience after they get hurt, for athletic prowess, mathematical understanding, we reinforce gender specific behavioral expectations. Children are not passive recipients of praise. They actively interpret the messages they receive. They know when they haven't performed well, but we praise them anyway. They know it's disingenuous, and they may start to question our judgment, thinking, "How could they think that was any good?" I've worked with parents whose own parents consistently praised effort rather than outcomes with comments like, "Well done. The grade doesn't matter as long as you applied yourself fully." And these parents now struggle with debilitating perfectionism that permeates every aspect of their lives.

Did I perform as well as I could possibly have done? So, I don't want you to finish this episode feeling discouraged. Right? I can anticipate your potential frustration or at least some of it. You might be thinking, "Wait, we're not supposed to use spanking or timeouts or rewards." And now praise is problematic, too. So, what the heck are we allowed to do? And I think this is where respectful parenting might appear overly restrictive, right? Defined primarily by what we shouldn't do. But when we remove praise from our parenting repertoire, instead we create space for more meaningful interactions, including acknowledgement that doesn't control our child and authentic appreciation.

So, here's a recent personal experience. Yesterday, my phone updated its software overnight and it disabled my alarm and so I overslept and I woke up with just 30 minutes to go before we were supposed to leave the house to



volunteer at the animal shelter, which we do every week. Before I hopped in the shower, I asked Caris to get herself ready to get our shopping bags and the grocery list from the printer since we had planned to go shopping afterwards. And at the store, I pulled the list out of the bag and I discovered a pen attached to the top.

And she knows I prefer marking items off as we go around the store and that I often forget to bring a pen. And she recognized I was especially likely to forget while I was rushing. And so she put one on the paper. And I was so grateful. I expressed it really spontaneously. You brought a pen. Thank you so much for doing that. I really appreciate you thinking of something that makes shopping easier for me that I would have forgotten. And so what distinguished this from praise was my authentic appreciation for her thoughtfulness with my response focusing on the effect her action had on me. I didn't label her with you're so thoughtful or any other character assessment that would have transformed the interaction from appreciation into praise. In reflecting on the way that I interact with her, I realized I don't think I ever praise her. While I was researching this episode, I found an online discussion among nannies who admitted using good job frequently because generating alternatives just felt exhausting. But they believe that children require praise for motivation.

So they had to say something. I suspect children may seek praise primarily because they've become accustomed to receiving it. Why decline something that feels good when it's freely offered? But I really think we should question the assumption that children fundamentally need praise for motivation. Children engage eagerly in activities that they find intrinsically rewarding. We don't need to praise them for drawing, for painting, for constructing with cardboard boxes. These activities provide natural satisfaction, making them ideal context for reducing praise. Instead, we can notice specific aspects of their creations, the color combinations in their artwork or their progress with watercolor techniques when they've previously used primarily children's paints. When we're acknowledging something they've done that affects someone else, we can describe the observable impact. Oh, you gave Mario half the cookie and now he's smiling.

This helps your child recognize how their actions influence others, provided you believe that they might have missed that connection, right? if they clearly observed it themselves. Saying nothing is perfectly appropriate, too. Recalling our conversation with Dr. Lisa Felman Barrett, we can't definitively know another's emotional state. Mario might feel genuine happiness or gratitude or smugness or relief at receiving half a cookie when he didn't think he was going to get any. Since we can't determine this with certainty unless he tells us, we can just say what we see.

We can also ask thoughtful questions about what aspects of their project they found most satisfying, what challenges they encountered, or how they overcame specific obstacles. If you participate in the activity, you might connect how something they learned previously contributed to their current achievement. This is called metacognition or thinking about thinking, and it's far more useful to children's development than praise. I recognize there will be situations where you've habitually praised behaviors important to you but perhaps less meaningful to your child. If you feel worried that they'll abandon these behaviors if you don't praise them, you can try a different approach. So consider what behavior you've been praising and consider whether genuine appreciation might serve instead. From what I've seen, authentic recognition genuinely matters to children. We've had illuminating conversations with Caris about this after we noticed she often helps clean at friends

homes despite showing resistance to cleaning up at home. We discovered that she values the sincere gratitude expressed by friends because they didn't anticipate she was going to help. She likes to surprise them with help and receive this authentic appreciation. And you might wish your child would simply complete chores without requiring acknowledgement each time. But don't you appreciate recognition yourself? My husband thanks me for preparing dinner almost every evening and his acknowledgement feels meaningful to me. I work with many parents who express irritation when their child doesn't verbalize appreciation for meals the parents have prepared. If we want recognition for our daily contributions, isn't it reasonable to think that our children might want it too? So rather than good job setting the table, you could try oh thank you for setting the table. I really appreciate not having to do it myself over time.

Perhaps a simple thanks for setting the table would be enough. We can also explore what underlying needs children are addressing when they decline to help. If they resist tidying their bedroom, what's really happening? Do they have an unmet need for connection with you and being isolated in their room while you're busy elsewhere blocks them from fulfilling this need? Does the seemingly straightforward instruction to put things where they belong feel overwhelmingly complex from their perspective? Caris has expressed this difficulty. is genuinely willing to tidy up if I remind her where things should go. This requires more effort than obviously her completing the task independently, but it transforms into a connecting activity. And isn't connection ultimately what we most desire with our children? We don't necessarily need elaborate outings to foster connection. Everyday tasks offer amazing opportunities for meaningful interactions.

If we've been praising them for completing homework which may lack intrinsic or even relevance to their lives, we can introduce the concept of self-determined rewards. I actually remember when Caris first discovered the concept of rewards. I think she was about five. We were on our way to the Grand Canyon. My husband and I were discussing them in in some context and she piped up from the back seat. She said, "What are rewards?" And I explained what it meant and she's like, "I want that." and she created her own reward system for tidying up, although it she stuck with it for about 3 days and she still occasionally implements this approach. So, we've recently begun a reading curriculum after we discovered she's likely dyslexic and she wants to improve her reading skills, but she finds the curriculum kind of difficult and not especially interesting. And so, during the past couple of Easter celebrations, I've organized treasure hunts featuring a special candy that she particularly enjoys. And she still has some left. and she decided to reward herself with one candy after completing each reading lesson. No lesson completion, no candy.

And I'm totally comfortable with this arrangement because I'm not controlling the rewards. I have explicitly told her she can eat the candy whenever she wants, but for several weeks, she's kept her system. This is really valuable self-knowledge. I also reward myself with activities I enjoy after I do less appealing tasks. I want her to understand her motivational patterns and recognize she can accomplish tedious or challenging activities with self-determined goals using her own reward structure. What I ultimately want for Caris and for your children and for you too is authentic self-expression in the world. I don't praise this when I observe it because I don't think praise is necessary or helpful. I try to support rather than praise her authentic expression. Even at 10 and a half, she does not give a hoot about social norms related to appearance. She frequently wears clothing inside out, backward, and with noticeable holes and stains. I recognize this does not reflect on my parenting competence, so I don't have to do anything about it. Although I acknowledge my privilege that other parents

might perceive this as parental neglect, but I'm not likely to get a visit from child protective services. I don't praise or criticize her clothing choices. This falls within the category of simply observe without comment.

When I notice her applying new knowledge, I can acknowledge this without praise. So today during her reading lesson, we learned the word phone means sound and we identified it within words like phonogram and phone. Later when I was reading the prophecy of Bane by Suzanne Collins to her, we came across two really irritating glowworm characters. One of them was called photoglow. Gareth laughed at that name and made fun of it. and I asked if she could figure out what photo meant by considering what other words contained this word part. She thought a photograph, photosynthesis, and she quickly figured out photo must mean light. I just kind of pointed at her with a smile and said, "You got it." and kept reading. There's no need for praise here. I also often use questions to explore topics she finds engaging. When she draws a detailed map to explain her strategic approach to the playground game Sandman, I ask her about her drawing and how she uses different parts of the playground structure. She loves sharing this information and it gives us genuine connection, not the superficial interaction that often accompanies praise. If you have a hard time thinking of things to say to your child that are connecting without praising them, don't forget the free list that I created for you of 55 things you can say to and do with your child to support them, to encourage them, to celebrate them without using praise. The ideas are in categories like expressing genuine appreciation, asking meaningful questions, connecting through shared experiences, helping children to recognize their learning, and celebrating authentic achievements among several others. You can find the link to the list on the episode page for this episode. Just search for episode 245 at your [parentingmojo.com/ep](http://parentingmojo.com/ep). So, as we wrap up, I want to leave you with the idea that praise may initially appear to be the gentlest way of shaping our children's behavior. But, as we've seen, it can subtly undermine precisely what we most desire for our children, authentic self-expression, intrinsic motivation, and the capacity to develop their own values and standards. When we move beyond praise, we create space for genuine appreciation that acknowledges specific actions and their impact. Curiosity about our children's experiences, perspectives, and feelings. Connection based on truly seeing them and their inner experience as valid rather than evaluating their behavior or them as people.

Understanding needs and discovering creative approaches to meeting both of our needs. Transitioning away from praise often isn't simple, especially given our personal histories with it. But when we give up our role as judges and evaluators of our children's worth, we free them to become their authentic selves, not just reflections of what we or our society wants them to be. So next time you feel that automatic good job rising to your lips, you might just consider pausing momentarily. Ask yourself, what am I trying to accomplish here? What need am I trying to meet? Is there a more authentic way to connect with my child in this moment? And these questions can guide you toward a more honest, less controlling relationship.

One where both you and your child can be your authentic selves and have your needs met. Isn't that what we truly want? Not perfect children who perform for praise, but authentic human beings who know their own minds and hearts. Not children dependent on external validation for their sense of worth, but individuals who carry their inherent value within themselves. That's the gift we might wish our own parents had given us. That's the transformative gift of moving beyond praise, helping our children to truly belong to themselves.

[Music]