



Using Behavior Specific Praise at Home: A Step-by-Step Guide for Families

What is behavior specific praise?

Behavior specific praise refers to praise statements that name the exact behavior being acknowledged. In short, it is spoken acknowledgement used to let your child know they have met your expectations. Behavior specific praise is a strategy used to teach new behaviors and reinforce expected or desired behaviors. When using behavior specific praise, state the expected behavior as opposed to general praise such as “thank you” or “good job”. For example, “Johnny, thank you for washing your hands with soap for 20 second as soon as you came in from playing outside.” While both types of praise help create a positive atmosphere, in naming the specific behavior, your child will be clear about the behaviors you want them to continue. In this example, Johnny will most likely remember to wash his hands with soap upon entering your home in the future because he was clear on the expectation and it was positively noticed and acknowledged by his family.

How do I use this strategy at home?

In the table below, we provide the steps for how to use behavior specific praise at home. Following the steps are two examples, one for younger children and one for older youth.

Step	Description
Step 1	Reflect on your current use of general “good job” and behavior specific praise “I see that you cleaned your room today!”
Step 2	Identify the behaviors you would like your child to do more of in the future. Tip: If you built an expectation matrix for your family, focus on those behaviors.
Step 3	Practice giving behavior specific praise.
Step 4	Notice your child’s behavior throughout the day.
Step 5	Provide behavior specific praise when you notice desired behavior.
Step 6	Make a mental note of how often you are giving behavior specific praise throughout the day.
Step 7	Ask your child what they think about receiving behavior specific praise from you.

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For additional information see:

Lane, K. L., Menzies, H. M., Ennis, R. P., & Oakes, W. P. (2015). *Supporting behavior for school success: A step-by-step guide to key strategies*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

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Example. With my elementary-age child

Step 1. Ana's parents reflected on how many times they acknowledged Ana when she shared toys with her younger sister. Her parents realized they did not often praise Ana when both sisters were playing together, and Ana was willing to share some of her toys. They thought sharing was just something their children should do.

Step 2. Ana's parents remembered that Ana only shared certain toys with her younger sister, and that many days she refused to share at all. Her parents decided they wanted Ana to share her toys with her younger sister daily, as they were spending a lot of time together at home with the new routines.

Step 3. Ana's parents practiced using behavior specific praise with each other so they could get used to giving acknowledgements. Some of their practice statements included: "Ana, thank you for sharing toys with your sister!" or, "Thank you for letting her choose a toy. That is very kind of you!"

Step 4. Throughout the day, Ana's parents watched Ana as she played alone and when her sister joined her. Her parents noticed when Ana was playing by herself, she seemed calm and happy. They noticed when her younger sister walked into Ana's room, she appeared less calm, and did not want her sister to play with her toys.

Step 5. Ana's parents provided behavior specific praise when they noticed Ana letting her sister play, "thank you for sharing your toys with your sister!" "Ana, great sharing with your sister today! I love seeing you two play together!"

Step 6. Ana's parents made note of how often they used behavior specific praise with Ana throughout the day, especially when she was sharing toys with her sister. They noticed when expected behaviors occurred and they took the opportunity to acknowledge them, the behaviors happened more often, and Ana seemed happier. Ana's parents noticed she started to invite her sister to play games and seemed more willing to share her toys on a daily basis.

Step 7. Ana's parents asked her if she liked when they told her exactly what she was doing that met the expectations, and if she liked those acknowledgements. Ana exclaimed, "It makes me feel good when you tell me I'm doing something nice!"



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Example. With my middle or high school child ...

Step 1. Maggie’s parents reflected on how often they praised and acknowledged her efforts throughout the day. They realized that they mostly used general praise statements, or they reprimanded her for not following their directions.

Step 2. Maggie’s parents thought about the behaviors she engaged in throughout the day and the changes that have recently been made to their family’s schedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They worried about Maggie’s physical health and well-being during this time. So, they decided the behaviors they wanted Maggie to engage in more frequently were cleaning eating areas before and after each use, and maintaining social contact with friends.

Step 3. To become more fluent with behavior specific praise statements, Maggie’s parents practiced using them with each other. For example, “Thanks for calling to check on your mom today. I bet that made her feel better.” “Nice job wiping off the counter with a disinfectant wipe when you were done cooking to help us keep the house germ free.” When they felt more comfortable using specific language, they were ready to support Maggie’s behavior.

Step 4. Throughout the day, Maggie’s parents observed her behavior to see how often she was cleaning eating areas and video chatting with friends. They noticed that she only sometimes wiped down eating areas as they had practiced as a family. She occasionally communicated with her friends electronically, spending more time on social media instead. They decided to focus their behavior specific praise on these behaviors.

Step 5. As Maggie’s parents saw her cleaning the eating areas and engaging with her friends, they used behavior specific praise to acknowledge her. For example, “Thank you for using a disinfectant wipe to clean the table off before you ate lunch.” “I appreciate you wiping the counter off when you finished making your sandwich. That helps us keep the house clean and safe.” “I noticed that you talked to Ashley on the phone today. That’s a great way to stay connected to your friends during this time.” “I bet Sam enjoyed hearing from you today. It’s important to let our friends know we are thinking about them.”

Step 6. Maggie’s parents reflected on how often they praised her throughout the day now. They noticed that they used behavior specific praise more often than general praise, and that focusing on what she was doing well made their time together more enjoyable. Additionally, they noticed that Maggie almost always cleaned eating surfaces before and after she used them, and she talked to at least one friend a day.

Step 7. After behavior specific praise was incorporated into their routine, Maggie’s parents asked her how she felt about receiving the specific feedback. Maggie said, “It makes me feel happy!”