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What is Behavior Specific Praise? And how can we use it?



MESSAGE FROM DR. ANDREA

Dear Reader,

Have you ever watched a child's face light up when someone noticed something truly special about what they did? That moment – that spark of recognition and joy – is one of the most powerful tools we have as parents, caregivers, and educators. And the wonderful news is, it doesn't cost a thing.

This little book is about something beautifully simple yet incredibly powerful – Behavior Specific Praise, or BSP. It is about the art of truly seeing a child. Not just saying "good job" as we rush through our busy days, but pausing long enough to notice and name the exact thing a child did that made us proud. It is about the kind of words that don't just make a child smile in the moment – but actually shape who they are becoming.

Throughout my 34 years of working with children, families, and educators, I have witnessed firsthand the remarkable difference that specific, heartfelt praise can make in a child's confidence, motivation, and behavior. It is one of the simplest strategies I know – and one of the most transformational.

Whether you are a parent navigating the beautiful chaos of home life, a teacher looking for meaningful ways to connect with your students, or a caregiver who simply wants to bring out the best in the children you love – this book was written with you in mind.

Together, we are going to explore what Behavior Specific Praise is, why it works, and most importantly – how you can begin using it today in a way that feels natural, genuine, and joyful.

Because every child deserves to be truly seen. And every caring adult in their life deserves to know just how much their words matter.

Let's get started

♥ Dr. Andrea



*Behavior Specific
Praise (BSP) is a
way to acknowledge
and reinforce
specific behaviors
that are helpful or
desired.*

WHAT IS BEHAVIOR?

Behavior refers to anything we say or do. While most BCBA's emphasize that behavior needs to be observable or measurable, it also includes private behaviors like thoughts and feelings.

The Dead Man's Test suggests that if a dead man can do it, then it's not a behavior. For example, not talking or not hitting are behaviors that a dead man can't do. Typically, behavior involves interacting with the environment. When we say or do something, it adds a new statement or motion to the environment.

So, in short, behavior is communication. Even if a child's behavior seems strange or disruptive, their actions are purposeful and show them trying to solve a problem. Behavior is never random or aimless. Children repeat behaviors unless they're getting something out of them. The behavior, even if it's not helpful, might be the best way for them to cope. When a child shows problematic behavior, it's often a sign that they haven't developed a certain skill yet. Instead of wondering where the behavior came from, ask, "What are they trying to communicate?" All their challenging behavior is a way of saying, "Something isn't right in my world," and they don't have the words or skills to express that yet. They're not angry or frustrated with you; they're frustrated with the situation. Please don't take these incidents personally; use them as opportunities to teach them skills.

Sometimes, just saying "good job" can be a bit of a cop-out for kids. But when you focus on what they're doing, that's when the magic happens! Behavior-specific praise (BSP) is all about giving kids specific, positive feedback about how they're acting, whether it's in social situations or at school. It's like giving them a high-five for doing something great, right after they do it. Instead of just saying "good job," you name the kid and tell them exactly what they did well. This helps them understand what's expected, gets them more involved, and builds a good relationship. It's especially helpful for reducing disruptions.

Why BSP is a Win:

- **It helps kids do better:** It cuts down on disruptive behavior and boosts their confidence and self-esteem.
- **Where to use it:** It works great in classrooms and at home, especially for kids who might be struggling, by clearly showing them what's expected.
- **How to do it:** Teachers and families can keep track of what kids are doing and praise them more often.
- **What to include:** Name the kid, describe the behavior, and give it right away, ideally in a 4:1 ratio (praise to reprimand).
- **It's free:** It doesn't cost anything, and you can always use it.

Some examples and non-examples of BSP in practice:

Examples of BSP	Non-examples of BSP
Thank you for looking at me when I'm speaking to you.	Thanks/Thank you
I love how you got right to work on that.	Good job!
Thank you for raising your hand.	Awesome!
Jasmine, thanks for cleaning up your room.	Excellent!
That is a great question (child's name).	Stop it/that!
I appreciate the way you ignored your classmates'/siblings' inappropriate behavior.	No, thank you.
You did a really nice job of explaining your feelings.	Nope
Billy, thank you for helping your sister get her coat on.	No response at all
Nice job making your bed.	Nice job.

Words like "nice job," "fantastic," and "awesome" really boost good behavior and encourage people to keep up the good work. We all love hearing them, and we often use them when we're talking to kids, students, family, and friends.

But, even though saying nice things is a great way to teach, it can sometimes be a bit vague. Phrases like "nice job," "fantastic," and "awesome" don't really pinpoint which specific action you're praising.

When you're giving verbal praise, it's not just about being specific; it's also about showing genuine enthusiasm and feeling through your body language, which can make your words even more impactful.

Think about putting in extra hours to finish a report for your boss by the end of the week. You hand it over, and they just say, "Thanks – good job." You got verbal praise for your hard work, but can you picture how much better it would have been if your boss had smiled, looked you in the eye, shook your hand, and said, "Hey, thanks for finishing this report! I really appreciate the extra time you put in. You're such an asset to our team."

The key difference is that in the first case, the boss used general praise, while in the second, they praised the specific behavior. Plus, the second example included nice body language, physical contact, and a compliment.

When you're giving praise, whether it's for general things or specific actions, it's key to give it right away after the good deed happens. Waiting too long might make the reward less effective, and it could even encourage some unintended behavior that pops up later, but before you gave the praise.

Also, try mixing up your words of encouragement—the same words can lose their magic over time. You can also add a little physical touch, like a pat on the back, a high five, or a handshake, along with the verbal praise. These extra touches really boost the reinforcement.

Verbal praise is a fantastic way to let someone know you're happy with what they're doing. While general praise is good, behavior-specific praise is even better because it points out exactly what you appreciate. When you give behavior-specific praise, you're giving the person positive attention and showing them that you're noticing and valuing their good work. Your enthusiasm and sincerity really make this type of reinforcement shine, showing people that you're paying attention and that you really appreciate what they're doing.

If you're interested in learning more about BSP and how to use it in your school or home, fill out the Get in Touch form on our website, and we can set up a time to chat.