

TOO MUCH PRAISE IS ABUSE

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By the time student teachers complete their training, they are thoroughly indoctrinated in using praise to manipulate pupil behavior. They have been urged to ignore undesirable behavior as much as possible and to apply positive strokes generously. So their students will not tire of hearing "good" used over and over, they have mastered a repertoire of such tidbits as "Nice going," "That's 'A' work," "Very creative," "Much better, keep it up," and so on. The day will come when they take over their own classrooms and see for themselves that through praise they do indeed gain greater control over pupil behavior. Thus they will appreciate just what an effective tool they have at their disposal.

But at what price? What are the consequences of effusive praise in the classroom?

The new teacher will no doubt notice that although some students learn to read and write more slowly than others, most quickly learn how to please the teacher. Contrary to what we might expect, when teachers dispense praise liberally, students' desire for praise does not diminish. If anything, it increases. What begins as a means for encouraging children to attend to their studies becomes an end in itself; students develop a value not for the subject at hand, but for the praise they increasingly desire.

Where the emphasis is on winning approval, where success is defined as the verbal pat on the back, the A on the report card, the smile and nod from the teacher, students lose the

point of evaluation. Instead of learning to make value judgments and think independently, they come to rely on others. They know how well they draw pictures or write stories not by any standards they set for themselves, but by their teacher's reaction. When the teacher bestows approval, they feel good about their work; when the teacher doesn't, they feel failure.

Isn't it detrimental to teach students that evaluation comes from outside the individual, from some authority figure? Wouldn't it be better for students to learn to evaluate themselves? Isn't there a strong connection between currying approval and sycophancy? When students find success through pleasing authority figures, through sensing what is wanted—just as many politicians ferret out what voters want and promise to provide it—pandering becomes a way of life.

If teachers wish to foster habits of critical thinking, students must be given experience in examining values and making judgments on a basis other than anticipated approval. We place little premium on originality of thought or independent thinking. And then we're disappointed when we fail to produce leaders who can attack the world's problems!

As long as we place a higher premium on winning approval than on critical thinking, on getting along than on questioning, on controlling student behavior than on developing their ability to evaluate, we will be unable to produce individuals who can deal effectively with critical social ills; ills that will escalate as our natural resources dwindle and our population increases. We must re-evaluate our present means for improving student behavior. ■

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