

Angry Parents Make Noise, Happy Parents Remain Silent

We all suffer from a biological curse that motivates us to say something to our kids when we're angry at them but to keep quiet when the little ones are doing what we want them to do. Imagine it's Sunday in October and I'm watching a football game. My two children are in the next room playing a game with each other, having a great time and getting along very well. What do you think the chances are that I'm going to get up out of my chair, walk all the way into the next room, and say, "Gee, I'm delighted you guys are having such a good time!"? That would be a great thing, but the chances of my doing it are about zero. Why? Because when adults are happy and content themselves, they are not particularly motivated to do anything more than what they're already doing.



But imagine that my children in the next room start fighting and screaming. Why do they behave this way?! I can't even hear the football game!! Now I am motivated—I'm mad. Now the chances of my getting up, running into the other room and yelling at the kids to keep quiet are high. Anger is a much better motivator than contentment. The result is that our kids are more likely to hear from us when we have negative rather than positive feedback. Youngsters as well as spouses can start feeling they're just a pain in the neck to us.

One Powerful Antidote Is Positive Reinforcement

One powerful antidote to this unfortunate biological orientation inside us is praise, or positive verbal reinforcement. As the saying goes about voting in Chicago, praise should be done early and often. Your praise; and other positive interactions with your kids should outnumber your negative comments by a ratio of about three or four to one. If you look, you shouldn't have trouble finding something to reinforce:

- "Thanks for doing the dishes."
- "You started your homework all by yourself!"
- "That dog really likes you."
- "You kids did a good job of getting along during the movie."
- "Good job on that math test, John."
- "That's wonderful! I can't believe it! How on earth did you do that?"

Keep a sensitive eye on your son or daughter, though, because praise should be tailored to some extent to each child. Some kids like rather elaborate, syrupy and emotional verbal reinforcement, while others do not.

Use Positive Reinforcement on a Regular Basis

How do you keep offering praise and encouragement on a regular basis? As I mentioned before, this task is surprisingly difficult, since most of us tend to shut up when we're content. Here are two suggestions. First, see if you can make two or three positive comments for every one negative. If that doesn't appeal to you, a second strategy is to have a quota system. Each day you make a deal with yourself that you will make at least five positive comments to each of your kids (consider doing the same with your spouse).