

How to Talk to Kids About Their Art Work

We all know that kids need positive reinforcement for a job well done. At the same time, we don't want to give them empty praise. With all good intentions, when we look at kids' artwork, we tend to say things that usually do not have the effect we want. The way that we respond to their artwork is vital to maintaining kids' sense of ownership, competence, accomplishment and confidence.

"It's beautiful! Great job!" We probably really mean it, but this kind of generalized praise in the classroom actually has many negative consequences, of which we are often unaware. How often have you heard a chain reaction of "Hey, what about mine? Do you like mine? Is mine good?" The reason this happens is that we have suddenly set ourselves up as the arbiters of aesthetic taste, and are simultaneously setting up every child whose work did not get praised at that moment to think that he or she has failed, or at least to question their own sense of accomplishment.

"I love it!" Even though we think we are being supportive, in fact we are undermining children's learning by communicating to them that they should be doing their best work in order to please us, the adults. We are telling them that we are the ones with the power to judge the quality of the work. What we really want kids to learn is that they need to do their best in order to please themselves. They need to internalize their own feelings of competence, through doing appropriately challenging work.

"Excellent!" Finally, we are leaving out important information for learning: what is it, exactly, that makes that particular piece of work "excellent"? Kids can be unaware of what makes the work high quality, and if we don't specify why they've done a good job, then they often don't know what specific strategies they can transfer to another piece of work. In addition, they may be so hooked into receiving praise, that they are afraid to risk

trying anything new, and will repeat the same idea over and over, knowing that it's the one that gets the praise.

How to get around this problem? The trick is to eliminate the evaluative language from our responses, and replace it with observations that specifically describe and validate the work. This means that we are actually paying closer attention to the artwork, and helping kids to see and own what they've done. So, for example, instead of, "It's beautiful!" : "I notice that you mixed a lot of different kinds of greens in your painting." Instead of, "I love it!": "I can tell that the waves were really big; look how big that wave shape is compared to the person swimming." Instead of, "Excellent!" : "You used really heavy marks in your drawing; that makes the bike look strong and sturdy." Instead of, "Great job!": "You figured out how to make the person look like she's running , by making bending shapes for her legs."

What about when a child asks us, "Do you like it?" You don't have to answer, if you understand that it's really not important for you to like it, but rather for the child to have a sense of ownership and pride in the work. Turn the question around: "Do YOU like it?" "Who needs to like it?" "Is it your best work?" Try asking specific questions: "How did you get the paper construction to stand up?" "Which part did you draw first?"

Finally, for younger kids, pre-K-2, you can always start a conversation by saying "Tell me about your work." They are often happy to tell you, and as with any artist, once you hear about the child's idea and intentions, it can be much easier to understand the work.

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Reference: [How to Talk So Kids Can Learn at Home and in School](#), by Adele Faber, Elaine Mazlish, Lisa Nyberg, Ph.D. and Rosalyn Anstine Templeton, PhD , Scribner 1996