



How To Praise With Power

By Michael Linsin

A teacher walks wordlessly with one of her most challenging students.

They're on the playground and it's recess time.

Some distance away the rest of the class laughs and plays and loses themselves in games of tetherball and foursquare.

From a distance you might assume that the teacher has pulled the student aside to [lecture him about his behavior](#), as so many of his previous teachers have done before.

But you'd be wrong.

This is a different sort of meeting. The teacher gestures and says a few words as the student looks up and nods his head. Then just like that, they part ways.

The teacher takes a bite of her mid-morning apple and scoots off the playground. The student turns and heads toward the tetherball courts. But clearly there is a change in him, something odd and wonderful that takes a moment to put your finger on.

His feet aren't touching the ground.

As he glides across the playground, his insides churn with renewed determination to break a year-after-year cycle of bad reports and time-outs, of disappointments and broken promises.

His teacher's words affected him deeply, in a way that will result in lasting change going forward.

Her words had power because she praised him in a way that *mattered* to him, in a way that sparked his intrinsic motivational engine. And this makes all the difference.

Here's how she did it, and how you can do the same:

She told him the truth.

Any and all praise you offer your students must be based on truth. It must be in response to real accomplishment rather than [a self-interested desire to placate](#), flatter, or manipulate the student into behaving.

In other words, the praise must be in direct response to achievement, excellence, or effort beyond what is commonly expected – which may include new learning or sustained improvement.

He relished her approval.

The teacher made it a habit to only recognize true accomplishment, which varies from student to student. She steadfastly refused to lower the bar of excellence in her classroom by engaging in false praise and “caught being good” manipulation.

This caused her students to tenaciously seek her stamp of approval through their good work. They knew that when they received a commendation from her, it meant something. It was special and real, and it motivated them to the core.

She made her praise personal.

The teacher chose to wait until recess so she could make her praise personal. In the long run, [a private moment](#) has greater impact than praise given in front of the class – which appeals to a student’s external rather than internal motivation.

The more impressive the accomplishment, the more important it is to pull the student aside to offer your praise. It’s the difference in effect between a mindless “good job” to a memory your students will carry with them for years to come.

And contrary to the oft-repeated advice that praise must always be immediate, giving your students a moment or more to enjoy their successes before jumping in can be much more powerful.

Her praise came from the heart.

The teacher’s words were imbued with depth and meaning because she was genuinely touched by the student’s accomplishment. Her heartfelt praise came from within and solely through the witnessing of undeniable progress.

If the praise is worthy, your words *will* be impactful. There is no reason to go on and on, feign enthusiasm, or even wait for the student's reaction. Simply express your selfless pride in their success, and then leave them be.

Make It Real

For every time you praise your students for what are common expectations – again, which vary depending on the student – you lessen the impact of praise based on true accomplishment.

You lower the bar. You weaken your influence. You dampen the motivation to pursue excellence. You place the mundane, the ordinary, and the expected on the same level of importance as transcendent breakthrough.

If a student performs a routine, direction, task, or procedure as taught, then a simple 'thank you' will do.

If, however, you witness performance that is truly noteworthy, then speak from the heart. Make your praise genuine. Make it honest and meaningful. Make it unadorned and direct and private.

And above all, make it real.

You won't believe the difference.