



## Moving from Sugar Praise to Acknowledging Children with Nutritional Praise

*“Children have a built-in voice recorder. What you say to them each day, they record and say to themselves for a lifetime. The feedback you provide must be meaningful and move from sugar praise to nutritional praise so that it sustains them and helps them understand the “why” behind their behavior.” – Julie Kurtz*

Our brains evolved to notice more naturally the negative than the positive. It is a primitive trait that evolved to protect us from danger and to keep us alive. In primitive times, if you saw only the positive you would be eaten by a wild animal or be unprepared for the unexpected attack on your village. Today, it takes practice and more effort on the part of the adult to intentionally scan for positive traits with our children. Most adults scan predominantly for the negative in working with children. How can you shift to acknowledge children by noticing what they are doing that is right? The more we focus on what is right, the more their brain will record that information and be incentivized to want to do more of that behavior. That relational dose of positive connection/acknowledgement and naming what the child did well brings it to the forefront of their attention and provides them with a dose of connection.

Adults help shape the internal narrative for a child. What we say and notice not only has meaning, effects their self-esteem but it records a meaningful internal narrative in their personal voice recorder about who they are and how they can impact those around them. For example, you can say to a child, “You helped your friend when they were sad and when you helped your friend that was being kind.” “You took your dish to the sink, that was so helpful.”

Today, it takes practice and more effort on the part of the adult to intentionally scan for positive traits on our children. Children receive an average of 5 corrections or neutral statements for every positive. How can you shift to acknowledge children with 5 nutritional praise comments to 1 correction or direction? Why is this important? What kind of praise is helpful to a child?

Adults help shape the internal narrative for a child. What we say not only has meaning, effects their self-esteem but it records a meaningful internal narrative in their personal voice recorder about who they are and how they can impact those around them. Praise alone we will consider the “what you say to a child” and the type of praise you use can have long lasting effects only if you use nutritional praise versus sugar praise. Nutritional praise statements provide not only the **WHAT (saying what you see)** – “You helped your friend when they were sad” but you can provide the **WHY (the reason their behavior makes an impact on the world around them)** – “When you helped your friend that was being kind.” With that second statement, a child learns the WHAT (you see me and notice me and commented on what I did) and the WHY (teaching a child that they impact the world and that their behavior was kind).

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**Sugar Praise:** Good job, you are amazing, I am so proud of you, awesome. These examples are not harmful or bad! The positive is that you acknowledge or see the child which can help build a connection and relationship. But too much sugar does not provide enough information for the child to understand why they are good, what they did that you are proud of or why they are awesome. They just record in their internal voice recorder, “I am good.” Deeper praise called nutritional praise is where the shift happens that lasts a lifetime. This is quick, fast acting but not long lasting for the child to build a sustainable internal narrative (voice recording).

**Nutritional Praise:** Connecting a positive behavior, intention or strength to a value, expectation and providing the “why” behind the behavior is nutritional praise. Let’s start with a few examples’ pf nutritional praise: “You cleaned up your mess, that is being responsible.” “You helped your friend with their homework, you are so kind and friendly.” “You focused intently on that project and persisted through even when you wanted to give up.” “You kept your hands to yourself, that is being safe.” This type of nutritional praise provides more data to the inner voice recorder for the child. They record not only the positive behavior but also the “why” or “reason” behind it. The reason is key to nutritional praise. You say what you see – you helped your friend. Then you add the why – that is being friendly. The child records in their inner voice recorder “when I help others that is being friendly.” The brain records much more efficiently and then decides to do more of that very behavior. Why do they do more? For one, when you notice and acknowledge a child, it stimulates the part of the brain (hind brain or mammal brain) that is responsible for attachment and connection. When someone we care about “see’s” us in a positive light, that part of our brain fires off what is called “feel good” hormones.

### **1. Notice the Positive:**

This is the first step. Breaking the habit of only scanning for and noticing the negative behaviors. Begin to notice the positive, the good intentions the strengths of a child. To develop this new habit means practicing is required to rewire your skills to begin to see the strengths and positive. Sometimes we wait until we see it “perfectly” before we praise but having a growth mindset means noticing small steps toward a positive behavior.

### **2. Narrate the Positive Behavior:**

Say what you see that is positive, intention or strength of the child! This is a simple way to acknowledge a child. For example, “You helped your friend.” “You are really focusing.” You solved your own problem by yourself.” “You are using a quiet voice.” “I see you are asking for help.” “You focused much longer on that task.”

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- 3. Connect the child's behavior to an expectation, character trait, core value:**  
If your classroom or family expectations are to BE SAFE, BE RESPONSIBLE, BE RESPECTFUL and BE FRIENDLY (see attached Matrix) then you can provide nutritional praise. Feel free to change your classroom or family expectations.  
Nutritional praise:

1. Say what you see – “Michelle you waited in line and kept your hands to yourself.”
2. Connect #1 to an expectation, value or the “why” to make it nutritional praise – “That was being safe.”
3. Putting #1 and #2 together – “Michelle, you waited in line and kept your hands to yourself. That was being safe.”

### **Practice Makes Permanent:**

**Step 1:** Creating a Behavior Expectation Matrix. It is best to start with an expectations chart describing for a child the expectations of your classroom or home. Involving the child/students in coming up with examples can help them understand. Expectations help make clear not only what to expect visually but provides the “why” behind a behavior. Can you fill in some examples of what children could do in each area.

Here are some Expectation Matrix examples:

Version 1.K-12

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### K-12 BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS MATRIX

We don't hurt others We don't hurt ourselves We don't hurt property	STAIRS & HALLWAYS	PLAYGROUND	REST ROOMS	LUNCH TIME	TRANSITIONS	CLASSROOM
<b>RESPECT</b>						
<b>RESPONSIBILITY</b>						
<b>SAFETY</b>						
<b>FRIENDLY</b>						

Version 2: PreK-2

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## Young Children Behavior Expectation Matrix School Examples

*We do not hurt ourselves, others or property!*

<b>SCHEDULED ACTIVITY</b>	<b>Kindness</b>	<b>Respectful</b>	<b>Healthy and Safe</b>
Arrival/Departure			
Large Group/ Shared Space			
Work Time/ Small Group			
Outside			
Meals			
Bathrooms			

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## Family Behavior Expectation Matrix

*We do not hurt ourselves, others or property!*

Kindness	Respectful	Healthy and Safe

[www.juliekurtz.com](http://www.juliekurtz.com)

### Step 2. Adult's Practicing Nutritional Praise

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Behavior Observed	Say What You See	Add Nutritional Praise
<p><b>Family Example:</b></p> <p>Billy cleaned up his toys</p>	<p><b>Family Example:</b></p> <p>Adult says, “You cleaned up your toys.”</p>	<p><b>Family Example:</b></p> <p>Adult says, “You cleaned up your toys, that was being respectful.”</p>
<p><b>Young Child Example:</b></p> <p>Audrey washed her hands before lunch.</p>	<p><b>Young Child Example:</b></p> <p>Teacher says, “You washed your hands.”</p>	<p><b>Young Child Example:</b></p> <p>Teacher says, “You washed your hands, that was being safe.”</p>
<p><b>Middle/High School Example:</b></p> <p>Alisa has been struggling with turning in homework. She turned in an assignment today.</p>	<p><b>Middle/High School Example:</b></p> <p>Teacher checks assignment and returns it with a comment “Thank you or a smile face.”</p>	<p><b>Middle/High School Example:</b></p> <p>Teacher adds a comment under thank you or smile face “I enjoyed reading your assignment and in particular thought your comment about xxx was a good observation you made.”</p>
<p>Other:</p>	<p>Other:</p>	<p>Other:</p>

For more information read *Hooked on Praise: Quit saying “Good Job!”* by Alfie Kohn.