

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT** *and* **PRAISE**

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**CHAMPION TEACHERS** make a careful and intentional distinction between praise and acknowledgment, acknowledging when expectations have been met and praising when the exceptional has been achieved. Kids who meet expectations deserve to have it noticed and acknowledged as frequently as possible. In a case where expectations have been met and acknowledgment is fitting, a simple description of what the student did or even a thank-you usually suffices:

*"You were ready for class right on time, John...thank you."*

Kids who do something truly exceptional also deserve to be told that what they did was above and beyond—that is, to be praised. Praising usually carries a judgment in addition to a mere description:

*"Fantastic work, John!"*

However, mixing these two responses by praising students for doing what is expected is, in the long run, not just ineffective but destructive. Consider this statement: "Great job bringing a pencil to class today, John!" Why, in the eyes of the rest of the class, is John being praised for doing what they've been doing all along? Are the rules different for John because he hasn't been bringing his pencil? Has John really been "great," as the teacher said?

There are two possible answers to this last question, and neither is especially good. The first is, no: the teacher does not sincerely think it's a great thing that John brought his pencil to class. She's just trying to be enthusiastic, positive, and encouraging. But the more enthusiasm she packs into her voice in praising John, the more she shows that her words are disingenuous. Her praise, she shows, is empty and cheap. Who wants to be great if that's all it takes? [The] misuse of praise has a documented perverse effect. Recent research demonstrates that students have come to interpret frequent praise as a sign that they are doing poorly and need encouragement from their teacher. They see cheap praise as a marker of failure, not success. And often they are right to do so....

The second possible answer is yes: some part of the teacher genuinely thinks it's "great" that John brought his pencil. She is pleasantly surprised. This potential reading of her words also creates a perverse effect: if the teacher is surprised that John did what she asked, her expectations are not real. She doesn't truly "expect" them to happen. She is surprised when students do what she's asked... A translation of what she is thinking is, "In my heart, I expect you not to do what I ask much or most of the time..."

[A] teacher who continually praises what's expected risks trivializing both the praise and the things she really wishes to label "great." Eroding her ability to give meaningful verbal rewards and to identify behavior that is truly worthy of notice is a dangerous practice for a teacher.