Reinforcing Language

Reinforcing language is designed to support students and keep their spirits up about their performance.

Replace Praise with Reinforcing Language

When your purpose is to encourage your students when they have done the right thing, the language you use affects the response you will get in the long term, if not the short. Broad strokes of praise, however, such as Good job! Nice going! That's great! I'm proud of you! at best provide a moment of pleasure to the student, and at worst fuel the craving we all have for others to approve of us. The stroke from you works like a small bite of chocolate—the student craves more. You hook him on looking to you to know whether or not he has succeeded and done a good job. You have created dependence, not independence!

If your purpose, like ours, is to help students develop their own intrinsic reasons for behaving well and working hard, then replace praise with reinforcing language. Praise and rewards are often offered as a manipulation. Specific, descriptive feedback about what has been done well, by contrast, offers information that will encourage students by creating a better understanding of what's happening. As in the formation of guidelines for behavior, we want students to get into the habit of making carefully considered decisions themselves about what is right and good, based on clear understandings.

Guidelines for Effective Reinforcing Language

Stay neutral: Move from judging to describing.

When things are going well, don't gush! Rather than send students into an emotional cascade of feeling good, keep your tone of voice as neutral as possible so they can process what you're saying and learn from it.

Everyone is demonstrating proper listening skills. I see eyes on the speaker and good body language.

The entire class handled that transition in 23 seconds. Now, we're ready to move on.

Use reinforcing language with individuals when appropriate.

Reinforcing language points specifically to an achievement and directly names and describes it, without judgment, positive or negative. It is unlike praise in that it does not create dependency. It provides the student with an understanding of precisely what he has done that was successful. The purpose is to liberate the student with the knowledge to make his own judgments about his performance in the future. Reinforcing language is by its nature reflective. It holds up a mirror so the student can see what he has done and think about it.

William, I see that you labeled every part of your diagram clearly and accurately. Do you see how much clearer it is than your last diagram?

Morgan, that's the second time I've noticed you holding the door so someone else can pass through.
Dee Dee, you seem to have mastered the use of quotation marks. Every quote in your paper began and ended with them. What helped you remember to use them each time?

**Use reinforcing language with the whole class, when appropriate.**

It's a good idea to address the entire class when things are going well and acknowledge their success. Right then and there, we want to point to specific things the group as a whole is doing to support the Social Contract, learning, or each other. Everyone wins when students understand that we're noticing the positives. Relationships flourish as pro-social behavior is reinforced.

As I look around the room, I see everyone is engaged.

We lined up quickly and quietly. This is going to give us more time in the Art room.

I see great body language during the discussion. Students are sitting up, leaning forward a bit, and giving each speaker solid eye contact.

One important side benefit of using reinforcing language with the group is that they'll be more likely to listen to you—and respond well—when you must redirect them. Many teachers forget to reinforce the group often enough, and sometimes pay a price in student attention, if students start to feel that their behavior is mentioned only when it falls short.

**Be specific, thoughtful, authentic, and inclusive. Avoid praise!**

There are important differences between praising and recognizing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRAISE AND REWARDS</th>
<th>RECOGNITION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generic and often sweeping</td>
<td>Specific to time and accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtless (a pat on the head)</td>
<td>Thoughtful (identifies something special)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive (only given to select few)</td>
<td>Inclusive (available to all)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulative (often used as a “carrot”)</td>
<td>Authentic (freely given every time)</td>
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Students need practice creating and accepting recognition as well as practice in responding gracefully to an acknowledgment with a simple thank you. Help them to keep their acknowledgements of each other simple, descriptive, and specific.

**Audie helped me with my work and I was able to get it done on time.**

I want to acknowledge Stephanie for inviting me into her group.

**I noticed Ricardo made it to the circle on time!**

**Jerome, thanks for helping me get to class on time when everything fell out of my locker.**

**Diane, I have watched the careful way you listen to people and don't add your opinion too quickly.**

**Q: How do I know if I'm praising or recognizing?**

The rule of thumb is to be specific and descriptive in the recognition: I saw you smiling at me when I gave my report, and that helped me be less nervous.
The number of acknowledgments a student may receive varies from zero to several, depending upon the day and depending upon how his classmates feel about him. Using acknowledgment rituals helps build trust and provides honest feedback, which students respect.

There are a number of structures to facilitate giving recognition. As in all community-building, levels of trust and safety dictate which activities will be most successful at various stages.

Q: How much reinforcement should I give?

You can hardly give too much—we're all starved for it! Seek out things, right in the moment, that are going well, even if in general they are not.

Yesterday I saw a lot of productive partner work. Today there seems to be a lot of chatting. What's something we can do to focus better?

**PLAN FOR SUCCESS: Reinforcing language**

- Whenever possible, keep yourself out of the equation. Avoid "It's in you, you.
- State the facts, not your judgment about the facts. Avoid sweeping, imprecise, vague phrases like "great" and "terrible.
- Let students hear information, not speakers.
- We are aiming for independence, not approval-seeking and pleasing.