

*EDITORS' NOTE: The Forum section of the Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions provides for an exchange of opinions, perspectives, ideas, and informative personal accounts. We welcome brief articles from family members, professionals, friends, advocates, administrators, researchers, and other individuals who are concerned with behavioral support issues. The purpose of the Forum is to facilitate a constructive dialogue among our many stakeholders regarding important issues in practice, research, training, program development, and policy. In this issue, the Forum contribution by Phil Strain and Gail Joseph is a response to a con-*

*troversial article from Young Children (2001), authored by Alfie Kohn, that criticized the use of praise with young children. Strain and Joseph describe Kohn's position and offer thoughtful rebuttals to Kohn's five reasons for eschewing the use of "Good job!" This discussion will be of great interest to individuals involved with positive behavior support for young children with behavioral challenges and to the broader readership concerned with the ongoing debate concerning behavioral practices. We hope this article stimulates further discussion of the topic, and we encourage readers with additional perspectives to join the exchange.*

# A Not So Good Job with "Good Job": A Response to Kohn 2001



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The field of early intervention has long been involved in a heated debate between proponents of behavioral teaching strategies and professionals against it (Carta, Schwartz, Atwater, & McConnell, 1991; Gallagher & Sigel, 1987; Kamii, 1985; Mallory, 1992; Strain et al., 1992). This debate has become more focused and clearly more relevant to the quality of services afforded to young children with special needs because more of these youngsters are being served in typical early-care and education settings (Guralnick, 2001). Not only are more children with special needs being served in these settings, but recent national survey data have suggested that the number of children who engage in challenging behaviors is increasing also (Joseph, Strain, & Skinner, 2003).

Given the increasing number of typical early-care and general education providers who are intimately involved in the education and care of young children with special needs, it is particularly disturbing to note that a major professional journal serving this group (*Young Children*) recently published an article that blatantly misrepresented behavioral teaching strategies and was openly hostile to adults who use praise. The case-in-point is the article by Kohn (2001), "Five Reasons to Stop Saying, 'Good Job.'"

In September of 2001, more than 100,000 early childhood professionals received a copy of *Young Children* with the following banner header: "What really happens when children hear 'good job.'" Since then, we have had numerous experiences in which educators in inclusive settings have asserted that they no longer use "manipulative, demeaning" behavioral practices since being enlightened by Kohn's article. Briefly, Kohn suggested that there are five reasons not to say, "Good job," that is, not to use praise. These are as follows:

1. It represents manipulation of children in order to maximize adult convenience.
2. It creates "praise junkies."
3. It steals the child's pleasure by telling him or her how to feel.
4. It results in less interest, not more.
5. It reduces achievement.

Moreover, Kohn took the opportunity to question the ethics and motivation of persons who use praise.

First, let us state from the outset that we are not universal apologists for behavioral interventions in general, for those persons who practice them, or for positive rein-

forcement strategies per se. Certainly, there are examples to which most of us can point where positive reinforcement has been used haphazardly and inappropriately. Also, there certainly are examples of so-called child-focused interventions being misused. What is most disturbing about Kohn's article is that the author misrepresents behavioral interventions, depreciates professionals who use them (a strange choice, given the overall humanistic tone of the article), and specifically distorts positive reinforcement. Moreover, it has been our experience that Kohn's article has been widely circulated and used as "evidence" for ending use of social praise. We argue here that Kohn's article is misleading, does not accurately depict the available evidence on positive reinforcement, demeans children and practitioners, and—worst of all—may serve to limit the use of a powerful, evidence-based practice for facilitating children's development. In organizing our response, we critique his five reasons to stop saying, "Good job." Finally, we suggest that Kohn's position is harmful to children, families, and the professionals who serve them.

### Response to Kohn's Five Reasons

In the following, we address each of the reasons Kohn provides for not saying, "Good job."

#### MANIPULATING CHILDREN

Kohn's first reason for stopping the use of praise is that it is manipulative and serves the purposes of adults only. No one would disagree that willfully setting out to manipulate children so that they engage in behaviors that are developmentally inappropriate and nonfunctional is wrong. Kohn offered two examples of such potential manipulation. First, he took issue with adults reinforcing a 2-year-old for eating without spilling. He then took issue with adults reinforcing a 5-year-old for cleaning up art supplies. Who are these people who willfully and purposefully set out to manipulate children for their convenience? Given the examples, perhaps it is parents who wish to encourage some social graces or fine-motor skills in their toddler, or perhaps it is all care providers who have a "clean-up" activity after choice time in preschool. Kohn asked if this adult behavior has less to do with the emotional needs of children than with adult convenience. We ask, is it not possible that the children in both examples would acquire valuable skills and that adults and other children in these settings would benefit as well? Beyond these examples, is it not true that children, family members, peers, and caregivers all benefit when intentional teaching results in more independence, more communication skills, more social skills, and an increased ability to self-manage behavior?

Kohn proposed that instead of using praise, one should have a conversation with children about what makes

a classroom or family function smoothly or how other people are affected by what we have done or failed to do. This conversational alternative is not incompatible with the use of praise; however, having such a conversation immediately after the problem behavior occurs could serve to reinforce the behavior. In addition, this conversational alternative is developmentally inappropriate for very young children, for many children with special needs, and for any child who does not have the language and cognitive capacity to (a) understand what a smoothly running classroom or family might look like, (b) understand retrospectively how his or her behavior might have affected someone, and (c) independently generate behavior alternatives. In short, Kohn seems to have offered an intervention alternative of minimal applicability.

Finally, we agree here with Kohn that the use of "Good job" or any other form of positive reinforcement used to exploit children is totally unacceptable. But, what if reinforcement is used successfully to teach creativity in toy play, to make choices, or to solve interpersonal conflicts? An impressive body of literature has demonstrated that these outcomes have been achieved through the use of positive reinforcement strategies (see Wolery, 2000).

#### CREATING PRAISE JUNKIES

Kohn asserted that positive reinforcement may even create a vicious circle such that "the more we slather on praise, the more kids seem to need it, so we praise them some more." This assertion, should it be true, would indeed be troublesome. We could only find evidence that pointed to its inaccuracy, however. For example, there is a well-developed set of strategies for systematically reducing reinforcement over time (see Timm, Strain, & Eller, 1979) and some three decades of research on its efficacy with children's behavior (Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2000). Persistent, continuous positive reinforcement is not and should not be the norm. If Kohn has seen such, he has witnessed bad practice with an otherwise empirically validated technique. To banish the strategy because of its supposed misuse makes no more sense than to ban all surgery because some operations go awry.

Kohn also suggested that children who are frequently praised will have poor self-esteem and poor adult outcomes. We do not know the longitudinal data that suggest a spiral of emotional decay in children who are praised. To the contrary, one might consider the longitudinal data on children from abusive and neglectful circumstances as depicting the consequences of too little positive reinforcement (Kolko, 1996; Thompson & Wyatt, 1999). Or, we might consider the observational data on the advanced academic achievement and social competence of children in elementary school who receive the most praise (Strain, Kerr, Stagg, Lambert, & Lenkner, 1984). Relatedly, if Kohn

were correct in his assertion, surely we would all know a troubled adolescent who got that way from too much praise early on in life. We have yet to run across such a person.

### STEALING A CHILD'S PLEASURE

We agree with Kohn that children should take pleasure in their accomplishments. The real question is how to help children learn to take pleasure in accomplishments that are developmentally enhancing, prosocial, and supportive of others. From what is known about socialization, we contend that feedback from adults, some of which might include positive reinforcement, is the primary means by which children learn to take pride in those acts that reflect prosocial values. This adult-mediated process is also how the traditions of culture, language, community, and religion are transmitted from one generation to the next (Del-pit, 1995).

Kohn also expressed concern about the judgmental nature of "Good job." As the literature suggests, this phrase is but one example of adult behavior that could operate as positive reinforcement. Other nonevaluative statements, such as, "You helped your friend with her coat" or "You are using so many colors," have equal or greater potential because they are more descriptive and thus more likely to function as positive reinforcement. Not all phrases that function as positive reinforcement need to have an evaluative element, as Kohn implied.

We are also a bit puzzled as to why Kohn seemed so deeply concerned that children would come to care about what significant others see as important as a result of being given positive reinforcement. We couldn't disagree more. In fact, we think that an essential ingredient to positive parenting and effective teaching is communicating one's deeply held principles. Clearly, using positive reinforcement is one way to do just that.

We find a number of Kohn's other arguments in this section to be illogical. He suggested, for example, that there is equivalence in being told "Good job" and "Bad job." He then suggested that children do not like being told that they have done a good job. Presumably, this rejection of praise stems from the equivalence Kohn sees between being told one has done well and being told one has done poorly. The evidence, on the other hand, has suggested that children's immediate and long-term responses to positive feedback versus negative feedback are fundamentally different (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Perhaps the best test for the validity of Kohn's assertion is simply to ask yourself how you react to positive feedback versus negative feedback on your job performance.

Finally, we are totally baffled by the seeming 180-degree turn of opinion regarding the use of positive reinforcement with young children. Kohn stated, "To be sure, there are times when our evaluations are appropriate and

our guidance is necessary—especially with toddlers and preschoolers." We could not agree more.

Although it is somewhat lost in Kohn's mordant diatribe about stealing children's pleasure with praise, we think he is promoting the importance of children engaging in self-evaluation. We agree that being able to pass judgment on one's own behavior and feel pride in one's accomplishments without relying on external feedback is an important long-term goal. Perhaps children who come from family environments in which they have received large amounts of positive feedback and support will have the self-confidence and skills to begin to evaluate their own efforts early in life. Even in these cases, it is not developmentally appropriate to expect young children who are still developing social and emotional skills to be able to do this without some external support and validation. Furthermore, consider the child who comes from a family environment or childcare setting where he or she has experienced a great deal of negative feedback, rejection, or situations where adults, overwhelmed with other problems, were unable or unavailable to build positive relationships to foster self-confidence. In these situations, the child most likely has a negative self-evaluation and low self-esteem. If this child were left to his or her own devices to evaluate his or her work and behavior, the child probably would pronounce it to be worthless. Just as we teach pre-academic skills to young children, we need to provide scaffolding for children to learn how to self-evaluate and self-praise. This is done by adults' providing children with positive feedback—modeling praise. This planned behavior by warm and responsive caregivers is necessary for young children until they begin to internalize the positive feedback and grow capable of realistic and constructive self-evaluation.

### LOSING INTEREST

Kohn was troubled by the possibility that praise would result in children working for the "goody" only. For us, the "goody" is positive child outcomes, and positive reinforcement has effectively been employed to meet these ends.

Kohn also suggested that praise motivates children to get more praise. What is true, based on hundreds of empirical demonstrations, is that praise (when it in fact operates as positive reinforcement) increases the likelihood that the prosocial behavior will increase in the future, not decrease, as Kohn suggested (Odom & Strain, 2002).

Perhaps a real teaching example is appropriate here. Suppose that a child comes to school not knowing how to share (an important skill for present and later life success). One strategy used to teach this skill might be positive reinforcement. That is, when the child is first learning to share toys and materials, the adults in the class are vigilant and try to provide positive comments when they see this behavior occurring. As is commonplace when children

begin to use this friendship skill, sharing becomes reinforcing in and of itself, calling for adults to use less and less support to encourage this behavior.

### REDUCING ACHIEVEMENT

In a continuation of his confusion, Kohn suggested that “Good job” functions to diminish the behaviors it is intended to increase. Theoretically, saying “Good job” might serve to decrease the future likelihood of some behavior that it is contingent upon. However, the data suggest, without equivocation, that positive reinforcement only serves to strengthen behavior. Moreover, children who have received a lot of positive reinforcement are popular with other children because they utilize positive feedback in their interactions with others (Strain & Kohler, 1998; Webster-Stratton, 1999).

In this section, Kohn also argued that “Good job” is a remnant of an approach to psychology that reduces all of human life to behaviors that can be seen and measured. Unfortunately, this ignores the thoughts, feelings, and values that lie behind behaviors. We presume that Kohn refers to behaviorism, and he is wrong once again. It is not true that behaviorism rejects the existence of thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Neuringer, 1991). Moreover, behavioral intervention strategies involving teaching self-regulation of emotion and cognitive behavior modification rely greatly on the existence of these internal events. Rather than adopting Kohn’s pejorative view, perhaps it is necessary to first consider that the environmental view promoted by behaviorism is essentially optimistic; it suggests that (except for gross genetic factors) all individuals possess roughly equal potential. Our society includes individuals who do not acquire essential developmental competencies, fail to make adequate adjustment to school, succeed at lower levels in vocational settings, and experience little happiness as adults; unfortunately, these poor outcomes are often associated with factors such as disability, race, and socioeconomic status. Rather than assuming that these individuals lack some essential internal characteristics, behaviorists assume that the poor outcomes originate in the ways the environment and experience shaped the individual’s current behavior. Once these environmental and experiential factors are identified, we can design prevention and intervention programs to improve the outcomes for individuals who should, on every other basis, have opportunities for good development, success, and adjustment. Thus, the emphasis on external control in the behavioral approach is not dehumanizing; rather, it offers a conceptual model that celebrates the possibilities for each individual (Strain et al., 1992).

### Conclusion

Parents, childcare providers, and teachers are undervalued and underpaid, and they have the heavy burden of doing

the right thing for children. In our view, they don’t hear “Good job” nearly enough. Rather than providing emotional and instrumental support, Kohn has made their task more difficult. He has done so by suggesting self-serving motives on their part, misrepresenting a powerful evidence-based practice, and suggesting his own nonvalidated alternatives. Kohn’s piece is particularly detrimental to individuals who work to close the achievement gap for children from impoverished school settings and for children with special needs.

At first blush, Kohn’s treatise on “Good job” may hold some liberal appeal; however, promoting nonvalidated strategies and therefore potentially precluding children from reaching their optimum development only serves to continue the status quo (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Delpit, 1995). In our opinion, children ought to have many rights in the education process, first of which is the right to receive those effective teaching strategies best suited to their individual needs.

Contrary to Kohn’s rhetoric, the planned use of positive reinforcement is antithetical to blurted-out judgments, slathered-on praise, knee-jerk tendencies, and evaluative eruptions. Kohn’s use of excessive language once again reveals his apparent disdain for individuals who would use positive reinforcement. Moreover, Kohn’s transparent language serves only to construct a fictitious “straw man” that Kohn conveniently burns in effigy. It is a pedantic tactic more aligned with high school debate than with reflective practice, critical inquiry, and the advancement of meaningful discourse about facilitating children’s development.

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Action Editor: Glen Dunlap

United States Postal Service  
**Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation**

1. Publication Title  
 Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions

2. Publication Number  
 1 0 9 8 - 3 0 0 7

3. Filing Date  
 October 1, 2003

4. Issue Frequency  
 Quarterly

5. Number of Issues Published Annually  
 4

6. Annual Subscription Price  
 N. American - Int. \$109, Indiv. \$43  
 Foreign - Int. \$138, Indiv. \$71

7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not printer) (Street, city, county, state, and ZIP+4)  
 8700 Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin, TX 78757-6897

Contact Person  
 Judith K. Vorets  
 Telephone  
 512/451-9246

8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not printer)  
 8700 Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin, TX 78757-6897

9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor (Do not leave blank)

Publisher (Name and complete mailing address)  
 PRO-ED, Inc., 8700 Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin, TX 78757-6897

Editor (Name and complete mailing address)  
 Robert Kogel, Develop. & Disability Program, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490; Glen Dunlap, Dept. of Child & Family Studies, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, 13301 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33612

Managing Editor (Name and complete mailing address)  
 Lisa Tippett, PRO-ED, Inc., 8700 Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin, TX 78757-6897

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Full Name  
 PRO-ED, Inc.

Complete Mailing Address  
 8700 Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin, TX 78757-6897

11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities. If none, check box  None

Full Name  
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12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates) (Check one)  
 The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes:  
 Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months  
 Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)

PS Form 3526, October 1999 (See instructions on Reverse)

13. Publication Title  
 Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions

14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below  
 Vol. 5, No. 4 Fall 2003

15. Extent and Nature of Circulation

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)	1784	1723
b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation		
(1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541. (Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies)	927	886
(2) Paid In-County Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 (Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies)	0	0
(3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution	0	0
(4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS	90	84
c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation (Sum of 15b. (1), (2), (3), and (4))	1017	970
d. Free Distribution by Mail (Samples, complimentary, and other free)		
(1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541	157	404
(2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541	0	0
(3) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS	33	8
e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means)	50	0
f. Total Free Distribution (Sum of 15d. and 15e.)	240	412
g. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c. and 15f.)	1257	1382
h. Copies not Distributed	527	341
i. Total (Sum of 15g. and h.)	1784	1723
j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c. divided by 15g. times 100)	80.9%	70.2%

16. Publication of Statement of Ownership  
 Publication required. Will be printed in the Vol. 6, No. 1 Winter 2004 issue of this publication.  Publication not required.

17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner  
 Judy Vorets, Periodicals Director  
 Date  
 10/1/03

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PS Form 3526, October 1999 (Reverse)

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