



Transcript- Episode 71

Less Praise, More Learning: 7 Reasons to Shift Toward Intrinsic Motivation

Episode 71 is all about praise. And it's not what you think it's about.

It's about reducing praise in order to get more learning. And today's topic is seven reasons to shift towards intrinsic motivation and away from praise. So I kid you not, we could walk into any classroom and I could just take data on the amount of praise that's being dished out and it seems awesome.

Good job, I love how you're sitting. Nice work, great job class. Let's keep going.

Wow, I love how you did that, right? And I'm like, ah, this place feels good. And it comes from a really good place. But today we want to talk about why not everything needs praise and how consistent or constant praise can actually get in the way of learning autonomy and motivation.

Yeah, and I think, you know, there's other podcasts of ours that I'll link to in the show notes, Julie, because I think people get confused about what praise is. You just, you know, gave a bunch of ones. And they're like, and then we get these yeah but's or these what if scenarios from people like, what if I give it this way or what if I say this or what if I. And so, if you don't mind friends, today we're not going to talk about how to give good praise or less generic and more specific praise.

That's another podcast that we have. And in our [Behavior 360](#), we go into a great deal about praise, rewards, and punishment. In fact, we've done a whole webinar on it and blah, blah, blah, okay? But we just want to talk for a minute about the problem with praise in general.

Now, does this mean that we shouldn't acknowledge or be positive? No. So, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

I did check that, Julie, when we were in Colorado and it doesn't have history of, you know, bad undertones of that phrase, I don't believe.

So, I think it's okay to say, throw the baby out with the bathwater. But it still might be a microaggression. But anyway, you get the idea, friends.

We don't want to go into the binary. We don't want to be like, oh, Julie and Kristie said we can never praise, right? We're just talking about the problem with how abundant praise can become and the other side of the coin, if you will.

Yeah, yeah.

And this work, for me, came to me when I read an article by Alfie Cohen and it was something like, why to avoid *good job* or how to avoid *good job*. And the part that I most resonated with was that we've got to reduce praise for lots of reasons. And so, today's episode is just going to focus on the reasons that we need to reduce praise.

So, I'm going to start with this idea that praise shifts the focus from learning to approval. So, praise shifts the focus from learning to approval, meaning when I do something, I now look outside of me to somebody who's in power for their approval to be like, was that good? Did I do it right? Are you happy with me? And it becomes about adult reaction and not how is this sitting for me internally or am I learning this or is this making me more curious or more excited? It becomes a performance for someone's approval. And I think it becomes so ingrained that we don't even recognize it across our lifespan about where our motivation is coming from or why we feel a lack of motivation or what to do when we don't feel motivated.

Like, we aren't building those strategies about how to notice that, well, maybe I'm unmotivated, quote, unquote, because I'm depleted or maybe it's because this really isn't a healthy choice. We don't even listen to that inner wise self, as you would say. So, but back to beyond just development and our emotional intelligence and our self-regulation, if we want learning as an outcome, we're making this argument, right, Julie, that less praise, more learning. So, why is that or how does that happen?

Yeah, so besides sort of praise shifting the focus to approval, another thing that happens is praise creates performance instead of engagement. And so what the learner learns is it's what I do with my body, my face, my hands, et cetera, to prove that I'm doing the right thing as opposed to actually engaging. And this is especially true for students with disabilities.

And so what we know to be true is students with disabilities, especially those that are supported by adults, maybe as a paraprofessional is assigned to them, they have a lot more supervision or surveillance.

Surveillance. Yeah, and what we learn is that we're creating compliant humans as opposed to humans that are excited to be learning because somebody is always judging their performance.

Yeah, so I don't, I wanted to say back when you talked about Alfie Cohen, Julie, that, you know, this is a hot topic and it has been by many different authors and thinkers. And so I'll put in the show notes the article that Julie referred to, though Alfie can be a little bit polarizing and there are times where their comments are off the mark in my mind too. But keep in mind, friends, and the download for this episode will help, at [inclusiveschooling.com/download71](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download71), we're not saying that we should avoid connecting with the student or giving feedback to the student or that anything external is bad.

Like, don't take it all that way. Notice what Julie's talking about, that where it's shifting things, how it's kind of maybe warping, that our intention started off in one direction, but the impact, which is the thing we need to be accountable for, brought us in another direction. So the idea of limiting or reducing praise for me,

Julie, is like that making room for, that I still have a job to do as a teacher or as the adult or the one with the prefrontal cortex.

I want to now notice more, describe more, listen more, and absolutely trust the student's internal world and have them pay more attention to that internal world. That's how we get self-regulation.

Yes, yes. So Kristie, you mentioned noticing. So you could say something like, you worked on that longer than yesterday.

Yeah. You could describe, you said describing, and you could say something like, wow, maybe you wouldn't even say wow, so let me go back. You could say, you tried two different strategies. My favorite that you said is reflection.

So you're inviting reflection. So you would ask a question. How did that feel to you? And what you just said, Kristie, is you're inviting their inner world to the discussion.

Because now you care, how did it actually feel to the student, not what was my outside perspective of that activity or that thing that they did. And, you know, Julie, that made me think, I was just talking to a friend last night that had a difficult interaction. And of course, you know, I want to give all this advice and I want to fix it.

And I want to tell them my perception of it, right? And so instead of asking, how do you feel? I'm like, you probably feel really frustrated and a little bit mad and a little bit. And the person was like, I just feel confused. I was like, oh, and I could have invited, you know, not quite replacing praise in that sense, but it's honing that skill in me of inviting reflection.

This is another place in my teaching that I can invite those behaviors of noticing and describing and inviting reflection versus my go-to of praising or telling or saying what I think.

That's right. I mean, I would say this does not come naturally to most educators.

And praise, we've learned, this is why I think this topic is so important. We've learned that praise is the end all be all and what it actually is, and that it's going to improve their self-concept and it's going to make them feel good about themselves. It's going to do all these beautiful things.

Now, there are just mixed ideas about that. What I know to be true is if you're inviting a student to reflect on their own experiences, anytime you're saying, instead of like, it's snack time, everybody sit, eat, you say, check in with yourself. Are you feeling hungry? Oh my gosh.

Does a snack sound good? If not, there's going to be another snack time later. Don't worry, right? Do you see the difference? Like, oh, my internal system matters. The clock doesn't matter more than that.

And so this, anytime you fall back to inviting reflection, you're doing this thing called building brains that actually go internally first, which helps every human

learn how to regulate themselves. There are so many things I want to go off on a tangent about snacks, which I won't.

Okay. But I really think as we apply this to our students with disabilities, and I'll say students with, I will say, let's just take verbal expression and let's just find a range of verbal expression from someone like me who's a verbal processor in English.

Yeah. And then take it all the way down to someone who types to communicate, which is a different mode and can't be at the same pace because it's just impossible even as you become fast at typing.

It's just a different speed, right? And then, let's take whether or not English is your language. Let's take whether it's your preference, take it, whether it's your comfort, take all that, right?

That whole range. Yeah.

If we're always praising, especially praising students for verbal output or quick responses or things that look compliant or things that look like correct, that's all those signals I'm giving. Then anyone else in that range is wrong or off or failing at some level, right?

Yeah. So even though I'm praising, I'm indirectly sending a message or directly sending a message to others on that range that they're wrong.

Yes. And that is picked up in subtle and not subtle ways all day long by learners. And, I think, some of the most ostracizing and marginalizing things is that there is a system that I'm not good at, that some people are getting praised for that I will never be praised for.

And you start to feel as if this place or space isn't for you and you don't belong in this place or space. And so we've got to rethink praise. And I know it's confusing and I know it's upsetting and I know anytime that you say good job today or tomorrow, you're going to think, oh no, is that the wrong thing to do? It's like let's complicate this.

Let's look into it. Let's see what praise is actually doing. And if a student needs praise to keep going, that probably means the task needs rethinking.

So some people are like they need it to keep going. And it's like, well, let's just change the task so they can be more independent or more supported. And so we just want to end today reminding you all that not everything needs praise and people don't need anyone else to narrate their worth or their score or their behavior.

And what kids need is an opportunity to trust themselves and to learn to perform without any approval. And so when we reduce praise, we make room, like you said, Kristie, for something better, which is motivation, dignity, and real learning. Thank you for tuning in.

SHOW NOTES

What This Episode Is About

“Good job.”

“Nice work.”

“I love how you’re sitting.”

Praise is everywhere in schools, and it usually comes from a good place.

But what if constant praise is actually getting in the way of learning?

In this episode, Julie and Kristie explore why reducing praise can lead to **more authentic engagement, stronger motivation, and deeper learning.**

If you are:

- Trying to motivate students without rewards or behavior systems
- Supporting students who rely on adult approval
- Rethinking classroom management practices
- Looking for ways to build independence and self-regulation

This episode will challenge what you’ve been taught about praise, and offer a more effective path forward.

Key Takeaways

- Praise is not neutral...it teaches students **who holds power and what matters.**
 - Constant praise can shift focus from learning to **adult approval.**
 - Students may begin to perform for praise instead of engaging authentically.
 - Over-praising can create **dependence on external validation.**
 - Reducing praise does not mean reducing connection, it means **making space for intrinsic motivation.**
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Answering a Common Question

Is praise bad for students? Not exactly, but overuse and generic use is a problem.

Praise becomes harmful when it:

- Becomes constant or automatic
 - Focuses on compliance instead of learning
 - Replaces student reflection
 - Drives behavior instead of supporting understanding
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Episode Download / Handout

What if Less Praise Led to More Learning?

This practical guide helps educators shift from praise-heavy interactions to **feedback that builds autonomy, motivation, and trust**.

Inside the download, you'll find:

- 7 clear reasons why reducing praise supports learning
- A breakdown of how praise impacts motivation and behavior
- Alternatives to praise that build reflection and independence
- Examples of language shifts you can use immediately
- A reflection question for teams to rethink current practices

👉 Download at: <https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download71>

What to Do Instead of Praise

Instead of praising, try:

- **Noticing:**
"You stayed with that longer than yesterday."
 - **Describing:**
"You tried two different strategies."
 - **Inviting reflection:**
"How did that feel to you?"
 - **Acknowledging without judgment:**
"That looked challenging."
 - **Using silence intentionally:**
Sometimes saying nothing communicates trust.
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Additional Resources

- **[Five Reasons to Stop Saying "Good Job!"](#)**: This influential article examines the unintended consequences of constant praise and explores why phrases like "good job" may not always support long-term confidence or learning. Alfie Kohn argues that children thrive most when they are encouraged to reflect on their own thinking, feelings, and accomplishments instead of relying on external validation. The piece offers a meaningful lens for educators seeking to foster intrinsic motivation, deeper connection, and more student-centered communication practices.
- **[Inclusion Podcast Episode 50- Beyond Praise, Rewards, and Punishment](#)**: This podcast episode challenges traditional behavior systems built on praise, rewards, and punishment, inviting educators to rethink

whether these approaches truly support belonging, motivation, and emotional growth. Drawing on brain science, inclusive practices, and real classroom experiences, Dr. Julie Causton and Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak explore how connection, co-regulation, and reflective language can replace compliance-driven systems like sticker charts and public behavior tracking. Listeners walk away with practical, compassionate strategies that support intrinsic motivation, dignity, and more inclusive classroom communities.

- **10 Inclusive Swaps: Moving Beyond Praise, Rewards, and Punishment:** This practical resource offers 10 powerful “instead of...try this...” shifts to help educators move beyond praise, rewards, and punishment toward more inclusive, relationship-centered approaches to behavior support. Grounded in brain science and inclusive practices, the guide reframes behavior as communication and provides concrete alternatives that build emotional safety, intrinsic motivation, co-regulation, and student agency. With immediately usable examples and reflective language shifts, the resource helps educators replace compliance-driven systems with strategies that foster connection, dignity, and belonging.
 - **PreK Teach and Play Podcast Episode- The Good, the Bad, the Ugly:** In this rich and reflective podcast conversation, Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak joins Alyssa Blask Campbell, Laura Fish, and Dr. Shauna Tominey to unpack the complex topics of praise, rewards, and punishment in early childhood and educational settings. Together, they explore how traditional behavior approaches can unintentionally prioritize compliance over connection, while offering practical, relationship-centered alternatives grounded in co-regulation, emotional awareness, and child development. The episode encourages educators and caregivers to rethink behavior support through a more compassionate, brain-informed lens that centers growth, dignity, and authentic human connection.
 - **Positive Descriptive Affirmations (PDA & PDA+):** This resource introduces Positive Descriptive Affirmations (PDA and PDA+) as a meaningful alternative to generic praise, helping educators shift from evaluative language like “good job” to language that specifically describes what a student is doing well. By focusing on effort, actions, emotions, and impact, PDA supports intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, and authentic connection rather than dependence on adult approval. Filled with practical examples and sentence stems, the guide helps educators build more respectful, relationship-centered communication practices that strengthen confidence, belonging, and emotional growth.
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