Talking Points for Trainers
Training Staff to Help Children Develop Self-regulation Using Descriptive Reinforcement and Encouragement Rather Than Praise
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GOALS
1. Staff know strategies for effectively reinforcing young children’s learning at the table
2. Staff support children to attend to internal cues around hunger and fullness rather than external cues
3. Staff support children as they learn about food and eating skills

Why Do People Use Praise?
- People praise out of habit.
- People are positively reinforced when a child responds to their praise.
- People praise because it seems like a nice thing to do.
- People praise because it makes them feel "in charge" and "in control."
- People praise because the activity of praising makes them feel they are taking a "more active" role in the child’s activities.
- People believe praise gives children "self esteem."

Perils of Praise around Eating

Praise at the table is typically quick and superficial. Most praise is offered as an evaluation of what a child ate, rather than as a focused plan to reinforce a child’s processes or efforts around eating. Common terms of praise are “Good job.” “Good boy.” “You are a good eater.” “Hurrah for you.” “I like that!”

Praise can:
- create a harmful competitive atmosphere around eating and trying food;
- lead to discouragement about eating;
- generate feelings of apathy toward eating cues;
- engender judgmental attitudes;
- create dependency on external control for hunger and fullness cues; and
- undermine persistence and attending skills when the praise interrupts the child’s eating and mealtime activities.
Advantages of Encouragement and Descriptive Reinforcement

Encouragement and descriptive reinforcement help children strengthen personal skills:

- courage to try new foods and eating skills;
- persistence in learning skills at the table;
- positive risk taking around new foods and meal behaviors;
- internal control in relation to hunger and fullness cues;
- self-regulation around eating behaviors and emotions;
- internal motivation to initiate new skills and maintain learned skills;
- self-confidence around eating;
- feelings of competence around eating skills and emotions; and
- belief in self as a healthy eater.

Techniques for Encouraging at Mealtimes

- Allow children to try foods, choose amounts, and serve themselves with only minimal interruptions.
- Plan meal environments and activities to match levels of ability. Choose activities that lead to individual success and challenge. Avoid frustration. (Example...as a child learns to use a table knife, prepare food that is easy to cut or spread).
- Ask children about their feelings and opinions about tastes, smells, and textures of food, rather than overriding their evaluations of the food without consideration of a child’s skills and knowledge.

Techniques for Using Descriptive Reinforcement at Mealtimes

- Focus adult comments on the skills the child is gaining.
- Describe a child’s effort or actions as she approaches eating and tries foods and serving herself, rather than evaluating the outcome of an activity.
- Use words paired with physical or partial physical assists as skills are attempted. Eliminate the physical assists as the child makes progress toward the skill.
- Eventually use non-verbal communication such as gestures, nods or hand motions to support children’s growing skills and efforts.
- Use vocabulary that reflects acceptance of children’s effort.

What People Must Know to Use Descriptive Reinforcement

- Possess skills for objective observation.
- Know which skills are developing and when to encourage the skills as they progress.
- Know differential definitions of “praise” and “encouragement.”
Possess a descriptive vocabulary to reinforce processes.
Know how to focus toward helping children find internal (process) reinforcement rather than focusing on external praise and teacher control through praise.

**Common Questions**

**Question**
*Doesn’t it take too much time to stop and reinforce descriptively? Is it worth all that effort?*

**Answer**
Excellent teachers are always encouraging children. “Good job!” is a statement that gives an external value judgment. Contrast that with this statement, “You spread the butter on your bread without any help, and you didn’t tear the bread at all!” Think about the difference in what is communicated. Yes, the effort is worth helping a child know what skill she achieved.

When you learn how to descriptively reinforce around mealtimes, you will find it easy, and you will likely not feel the need to offer superficial praise. (Try it out with your friends, your family, or your spouse. It gets easier as you practice.

**Question**
*Is it wrong to just say something simple such as, “you are a good eater.” Is that a bad thing?*

**Answer**
This praise statement is well intentioned, but it doesn’t teach anything specific or give the child information about what he has accomplished or the effort he used. It may make for competition, as well. In an effort to please you, the child hopes to hear you say, “You are a good eater.” To continue to please you, a child might eat outside his internal cues boundaries. Sometimes other children will hear your statement and then ask, “I’m a good eater, too, Miss Johnson?” Contrast the “good eater” statement with a descriptive statement such as, “You know how to use that serving spoon to pick up those potatoes.” “You tried getting the beans on your fork three times, and then you got them on the fork. You worked hard at finding out how to do that.”

**Question**
*Is there a research base for using descriptive reinforcement over praise?*

**Answer**
Yes, there is evidence that young children’s skills are best supported by descriptive statements about the process they use as they learn, and about their level of effort. Elementary age children are best supported by descriptive statements about the process and activity they do, and not so much the effort they put forth.