What You Say Matters! Motivating Children at the Mealtime Table
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There is evidence that reinforcement works to motivate and maintain learning. Teachers reinforce mealtime behaviors and habits with what they say. Mindful teachers are intentional and purposeful about the power of their words on children’s motivation. If you want to be intentional about what you say to encourage and reinforce a child’s learning, it is wise to think about the power of words before you talk. What you say at the table matters!

Types of Comments for Reinforcement/Encouragement at Mealtimes
(See Figure 1 and 2 for examples)

• **Neutral**: These comments are impartial and offer no particular support for or against an action.
• **Person-centered**: These comments offer reinforcement that focuses on the characteristics of a child.
• **Achievement-centered**: These comments offer reinforcement on the quality of behavior.
• **Effort-centered**: These comments offer reinforcement of child’s attempt at the act or behavior.
• **Process-centered**: These comments offer reinforcement of what the child is doing as the behavior is practiced, along with a supportive statement.

Which Types of Comment Works Best With Young Children?

These TWO are most EFFECTIVE
With young children, process-centered encouragement comes in at a tie with effort-centered encouragement. Young children are as motivated by encouragement of effort as they are by encouragement of their process. With people who are older than five years, however, the most effective comments are those that are process-centered reinforcements. This type of comment helps people know exactly what you are encouraging them to do or learn.

These THREE have LITTLE EFFECTIVENESS
Achievement centered comments come in a distant third to effort-centered or process-centered comments for motivating children. Person-centered comments are only mildly effective to motivate children. Neutral comments have no effect.

Why should you care about what you say?
Does it take too much time and effort to use effort or process praise? Think about how your desire to be an effective teacher. We want to help children to be competent and successful. It takes time to become comfortable using effort and process-centered encouragement. You can learn to use effective encouragement comments. Practice using effort and process-centered encouragement with staff and family members when time and busyness with the children are not factors.

What You Say Really Matters
Once you know how to use effort and process-centered encouragement, it becomes easy to be intentional about using comments that reinforce children’s mealtime development. You will become aware of the emptiness of person or achievement-centered praise.

**LESS EFFECTIVE**

- **Person centered praise**
  - "You are a good girl."

- **Achievement centered praise**
  - "You are the best pourer in the world."

**LESS EFFECTIVE**

- **Effort centered praise**
  - "You worked hard to pour that milk."

**MORE EFFECTIVE**

- **Process centered praise**
  - "You picked up the pitcher, tilted it, and watched as the milk went into your cup. You poured your milk all by yourself."

**MOST EFFECTIVE**

Neutral comment: Teacher says, "Uh huh. I see that."

**Person-centered comment:** Teacher says, "Yes, you are a big girl."

**Achievement-centered comment:** Teacher says, "You are the best carrot-eater in the whole school."

**Effort-centered comment:** Teacher says, "You were brave and you worked hard to get up courage to try those carrots."

**Process-centered comment:** Teacher says, "You picked up that carrot. You smelled it. You tasted it. You took a bite, and then, you chewed it up, and you said you liked it. You are learning to try foods you’ve never tried before."