

## **Five praises daily for young children. The need for a campaign.**

### **Carole Sutton**

Let the master praise him, and say, "Here ye do well."

For, I assure you, there is no such whetstone to sharpen  
a good wit, and encourage a will to learning, as is praise."

(Ascham, 1570)

Despite the very substantial sums of money being made available to support parents to develop loving and effective parenting, and the opening of Children's Centres all over the country, increasing numbers of children are still known to be suffering from neglect and abuse, while the figures of those children permanently excluded from preschool and primary school provision continue to cause great concern.

Concerning abuse, 34,100 children were the subjects of a Child Protection Plan in England during the year ending March 2009, an increase of 4,900 (16.8%) upon the previous year. In that period and in each of the four previous years approximately half of the number of children suffered from neglect, about a quarter from emotional abuse, about 2000 from sexual abuse while the remaining children experienced physical or 'mixed' abuse. Of the 34,100 children concerned during that same year, their ages were as follows: 560 were unborn, 4,200 were under one year old, 10,700 were between one and four years, over 9,000 were between five and nine and a further 8,600 were aged ten to fifteen. The remainder were 16 years and over. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009).

Concerning children's experience at school, the statistics from the DCSF concerning permanent and fixed period exclusions in England, 2006/07 indicate that,

- There were 8,680 permanent exclusions from primary, secondary and all special schools in 2006/07, which represents 0.12 per cent of the number of pupils in schools (12 pupils in every 10,000).
- In 2006/07 there were 363,270 fixed period exclusions from state funded secondary schools, 45,730 fixed period exclusions from primary schools and 16,600 fixed period exclusions from special schools

Further, it was reported by *The Independent on Sunday* for 6 November 2008 that, 'Thousands of children aged five and under were suspended from schools in England last year for assaulting fellow pupils and teachers.' (Kershaw, 2008).

These data are deeply distressing. There are, however, some encouraging signs: the very fact that over 3000 Sure Start Children's Centres have been built and staffed is evidence that governments are at last beginning to recognise the significance of the earliest years of life for subsequent development, and there is recognition by policy makers that in the fields of health, mental health, educational difficulties and offending, prevention rather than cure is the way forward. Moreover, the most recent evaluation of the Sure Start/Local Programme (SSLP) initiative (National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, 2008) found that children living in the SSLP areas, by comparison with those living in comparable areas but without SSLP provision, showed, among several positive outcomes, the following characteristics:

- \* Parents of three-year-old children showed less negative parenting while providing their children with a better home learning environment.
- \* Three-year-old children in SSLP areas had better social development with higher levels of positive social behaviour and independence/self-regulation than children in similar areas not having a SSLP.
- \* The SSLP effects for positive social behaviour appeared to be a consequence of the SSLP benefits upon parenting (i.e., SSLP>Parenting>Child).

To support these moves towards a preventive approach substantial further resources are being directed to the training and support of additional health visitors, towards the development of parenting programmes and towards the appointment of family aides and family support staff. Despite government assurances that Sure Start Children's Centre services will not be cut in the present difficult financial climate they are clearly extremely vulnerable.

### **An additional preventive aid: the campaign for Five Praises a Day**

In such circumstances, while the invaluable work with individuals, families and groups which characterises the practice of many practitioners must go on, the need for an additional model of preventive practice is evident. In the field of public health the

‘Five Fruits and Vegetables Daily’ campaign has been launched and is gradually becoming part of public awareness. I wish to make the case here that we need to take a similar proactive approach **to encourage good mental health**. Professor Martin Herbert and I are launching a campaign to disseminate the maxim, ‘Five praises a day’ which advocates encouraging parents to offer their very young children five positive messages or appreciations a day, alongside ‘Five fruits and vegetables’. As this maxim becomes commonly known, it can inform the child-rearing practice of parents who are struggling to bring up preschool children but who may seldom encounter – indeed may actively avoid – professionals or professional guidance.

At no age is this adage more relevant and important than in the first months and years of life. Yet parents who are struggling with the demands of very young children, sometimes with several toddlers under the age of five, may well be unaware that praise and delight in the child contributes greatly to an infant’s wellbeing, not only at the present time but as an investment in the child’s future emotional health. Some mothers with whom I was talking recently about children’s development and whom I asked if anyone had ever discussed with them how important and valuable it was to admire and praise little children, said, No, no one ever had. It seemed an alien idea to them. It was this conversation which led to the decision of Professor Herbert and myself to develop the Five Praises a Day campaign.

### **Research into underpinning processes of bonding and attachment**

As we have learned from the work of the neurobiologists and neuroscientists, vitally important pathways are laid down in the baby’s brain during these early months and years which underpin that child’s future health and mental health. Talk, touch and gaze are key means whereby parents and caregivers demonstrate their love for and delight in their babies and small children. We know from abundant studies that parents are usually predisposed to express admiration for and enjoyment of small children and that this elicits the smiling response from babies which gives such pleasure to the caregivers (Sroufe and Waters, 1976; Ellsworth, Muir and Hains, 1993). Clearly this is an emotional exchange, a dance, underpinned by natural processes, to enable baby and parent to fall in love with each other.

There is the beginnings of a research field into some of these natural processes, which include the neurobiological mechanisms associated with reward processing.

For example, Dillon et al (2009), recognising that in animal studies early adversity is associated with dysfunction in key brain regions associated with reward, have extended the field into research with humans. This team worked with 13 young adults who experienced maltreatment before age 14 years and a control group of young adults who had not been maltreated. They found that childhood adversity in the maltreated young people was associated with 'blunted' responses in the brain regions associated with reward-related learning and motivation. They went on to suggest that these circumstances may, with other factors, predispose 'to the multiple negative outcomes and psychopathologies associated with childhood adversity', and that the symptoms of apathy, low ability to experience pleasure and reduced motivation, all features of depression, are sequelae of maltreatment.

The studies of Hart and Risley (1995) in the United States are also of great importance here. These researchers gathered data over approximately two and a half years from 13 professional families, 23 working-class families and 6 families receiving welfare benefits. They coded the interactions between parents and their young children aged 10 to 36 months for an hour every month, examining vocabulary and the types of feedback offered to children. They found that the children in the families on welfare were not only deprived linguistically but they were also disadvantaged with regard to the number of affirming, as opposed to discouraging, messages that they received from their parents. The children in the professional families typically received 166 000 encouragements and 26 000 discouragements; the working class children experienced 62 000 encouragements and 36 000 discouragements while the children whose parents were receiving welfare benefits experienced 26 000 encouragements and 57 000 discouragements in the course of a year. Hart and Risley report that *'The amount of children's experience with encouraging feedback was strongly associated with the magnitude of their accomplishment at age 3 and at age 9-10'* (my italics).

In many families, where parents are supported by relatives and friends so that they can go on responding to the babies' needs, a preponderance of positive interactions ordinarily lead to the development of attachment in the baby or toddler to those parents and carers and to the bonding of mothers, fathers, siblings and other caregivers with the child. Sometimes, however, this process does not flow naturally - through exhaustion on the part of the parents, through stress, anxiety or postnatal

depression. Here is a situation where the maxim, 'Five praises a day', may help the parent to remember to focus upon and express delight in the baby's beauty, his tiny fingers or her soft skin, to draw others' attention to these features and to share enjoyment of the child with members of the extended family or social group. Of such simple interactions maternal and paternal bonding and baby-parent attachments are composed.

However, a stage soon arrives at which toddlers typically begin to exercise independence, to say No! and to be reluctant to comply with instructions which only yesterday they were ready to obey. So many parents seem to lose confidence at this stage (Morawska and Sanders, 2007) and, under stress from multiple pressures, can, in their confusion, act randomly, erratically and inconsistently. As we know, these are the very responses which are most likely to maintain a toddler's noisy, disruptive and disorganised behaviour. It is at this 'terrible twos' stage that it would be so beneficial to have an adage, familiar to all, which prompts parents and caregivers to recognise the developmental stage which their toddler has reached, to redirect their attention from the 'naughty' behaviour towards what he or she is achieving, and to maintain positive, nurturing messages. Setting limits to the child's behaviour but 'catching the child behaving well' in order to reinforce this 'good' behaviour are core parenting skills, which the maxim can act to cue.

### **Praise and play act to promote attachment**

Despite all the efforts made by those engaged in disseminating parenting programmes, we still encounter so many, many families to whom the notion of positive encouragement and praise for children is totally unfamiliar and sometimes even alien. Yet abundant research has demonstrated the helpfulness and effectiveness of praise and play to the point where, after full assessment, these elements are often central components of the parenting packages which have demonstrated effectiveness in responding to children's behavioural and emotional difficulties and in supporting their parents. (Patterson, 1976; Sanders, 1994; Patterson et al. 2002; Sutton, 1992, 1995; Scott et al, 2001).

It has been possible to examine many of the 'parenting packages' and associated literature of the programmes commissioned in this country by the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners, a body set up to promote evidence-based parenting skills

and to support those disseminating them. Nine packages were available to explore. As measured by the number of pages of guidance devoted in their manuals to the topic of giving praise or appreciation to children, three packages appeared to rank this of very high or high importance, four ranked it as of moderate importance, while the remaining two ranked it as of low importance. None actively advised against it.

I have reported elsewhere (Sutton, 2001) that in the course of my research with parents who were asking for help with their unmanageable young children, helping them to praise desirable behaviour in their children appeared to elicit affectionate and loving behaviour towards their parents from some – a phenomenon which surprised and delighted the parents. I called this ‘the resurgence of attachment (behaviours)’. Thus a totally unexpected outcome of an essentially cognitive behavioural programme was the spontaneous emergence in some of the children of patterns of warm and loving interactions with their parents. This unsolicited information was given spontaneously by parents at evaluation. Readers can imagine the joy this produced among parents who had begun to feel acute stress, embarrassment and shame concerning their relationships with their young children.

This accords with the evidence that while some children maintain a constant pattern of attachment throughout their lives, others move in and out of differing patterns (Thompson, 2000). This appears to demonstrate brain plasticity and that patterns of attachment may be more malleable and less fixed from earliest childhood for all time than may have been formerly thought. If so, it behoves us to act as early as possible to promote those circumstances which can enhance attachment. The maxim, ‘Five praises a day’ could help hundreds of those children reported above as suffering from abuse and neglect.

### **Cautioning voices – and a response**

There have of course been critics of the use of praise in bringing up children. Dweck (2007) has highlighted the pitfalls of allowing children to expect unwavering approval, especially when this is directed towards their intelligence rather than their effort. She is right: these pitfalls exist. However, we are concerned here with very young children, those below the age of five and primarily with their behaviour, rather than their intelligence or physical attributes. ***These are little children who need praise***, both as a source of nurturance and as feedback, so that they may learn confidence

and the conventions of their culture. Other critics, such as Baumeister, Hutton and Cairns (1990), have demonstrated that giving praise to skilled practitioners has the effect of undermining those skills, not enhancing them. However, we are concerned here with **very unskilled practitioners indeed**, namely, toddlers learning to walk, to feed themselves, to toilet themselves, to dress themselves and to develop a sense of competence and self worth.

Accordingly, we have prepared a simple card, showing a range of cameos of children's behaviour: toddlers brushing their teeth, learning to ride a tricycle, caring for a kitten. Each of these cameos will act as a prompt for parents to praise the child's effort or achievement. A grid on the reverse prompts parents to continue finding aspects of their children's behaviour or efforts which they can commend and appreciate. The slogan 'Don't forget to set firm boundaries' accompanies the positive message.

If readers of this article would like to receive 10 free copies of this card for distribution they should send an A5 stamped addressed envelope to:

Carole Sutton, PhD, CPsychol.,

Unit for Parenting Studies,

Hawthorn Building,

De Montfort University,

Leicester.

LE1 9BH.

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