

Counseling for Moms

**How to Conquer
Bad Behavior
Without Stress**

By: Karen DeBolt, MA
Parent Coach & Family Therapist

For my children who continue to inspire me each and everyday

Talla, Molly & Sam Moyers and Heather DeBolt

And to my husband who makes my dreams come true

You did then what you knew how to do, and when you knew better...you did better.
- *Maya Angelou*

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Table of Contents

Ready to calm the Chaos?	1
Why doesn't he listen?	1
How to shift the balance Mikey gets ready	2
Okay, so how do I do it?	3
An Example Just another day at Sally's house – No specific praise Mom's got a brand new bag – With Specific Praise	4
It works everywhere!	5
Examples of ways to phrase specific praise	5
Exclamations add extra energy	5
Gestures	5
Specific Praise Plan Ahead Worksheet	6
Specific Praise Challenge	7
Quick Reference	8
Wanting more?	9
About the Author	9

Ready to calm the Chaos?

“Not again!” You just told your child for the 10,000th time not to jump on the couch, pull the cats tail or pester his sister. Why does he keep doing these things! Is he trying to drive you crazy? It can sure feel that way, but in fact your child is not invested in how large your therapy bill is, and he has no idea how many times counting to ten has saved his life.

There has got to be a better way to calm the chaos and have more happiness. In this report, I will describe how negative patterns begin and how they get out of control and then describe a technique which I have found to be key in reversing the negative behavior spiral. First, let's explore how those negative patterns got set in the first place.

Why doesn't he listen?

Some people would say, “That child is just seeking attention.” While attention does fulfill a need. There is more to the story. All humans require a certain amount of energy. This energy can come from many sources including other people, nature, and spiritual practice to name a few.

You have probably had the experience of feeling very drained after talking to a difficult person. This person may have been draining energy from you. Children also need energy and while some children seem to be able intuitively to get energy themselves, others struggle to get their needs met without resorting to challenging behavior.

He doesn't care if the energy is positive or negative, he just knows subconsciously that he needs it and needs a lot of it. *So how does pulling the cat's tail fulfill this need?*

When your daughter pulls the cat's tail, she receives an instant feedback of energy from the cat's yowl. She then gets a second dose when you lecture her about how to treat the cat gently. With one fell swoop, she can get a double dose of energy. If she goes back and does it again five minutes later, you are probably going to lose your temper, which feeds this negative energy spiral even more.

When was the last time you got as animated about something good she did as you got when she did something that frustrated you?

Its human nature to take every day good behavior for granted. We might remember to thank our child for a chore well done with a generic “good job” but in order to get a big energetic pay off your child has to do something pretty darn good. So, if you think about it, it's much much easier to pester a sister or jump on the couch.

To get better behavior you will need to shift that energetic balance.

How to shift the balance

Simply put, the balance needs to shift so that negative behaviors receive a very matter of fact treatment – and good behavior receives animated, specific praise.

Specific Praise = **energy**

This is not just “catching your child being good.” This is actually creating situations where your child can receive praise. Praise does four things for your child:

- **Feels great!**
- **Reinforces behaviors you want to see**
- **Encourages even more good efforts**
- **Strengthens your relationship**

Mikey gets ready

Mikey was driving his mom, Arlene, and dad, James, bonkers with his constant arguing and back talk. His mom could say, “Mikey, lets go to the park.” And he would have an argument every step of the way from putting on shoes and jacket to buckling his seat belt. Once he got to the park, he loved it, but it was so exhausting getting him there that Arlene didn't take him very often.

Someone suggested to Arlene that Mikey may be having trouble transitioning from one activity to another so Arlene began letting Mikey know ahead of time what would happen that day as well as letting him know well in advance of a transition.

But still Mikey struggled.

When Arlene heard about specific praise, she figured it was worth a try. She began to use specific praise with Mikey every step of the getting ready process. “Mikey, you put your sock on your foot!” “Mikey you put your shoes on all by yourself!” “Mikey, I'm so proud of the way you buckled your seat belt without me reminding you!” All delivered in a genuinely animated voice punctuated with clapping hands or an amazed “Wow, look at you!” that got Mikey's attention and filled him up with energy as well as self-confidence.

Over time, Mikey began to get ready for the day double quick, and Arlene noticed he was really feeling good about himself. Woohoo!

Okay, so how do I do it?

The trick is to be as descriptive and as animated as you can. This may feel very weird at first, but as with anything new, the more you do it, the more natural it will become for you. Being in a negative pattern for such a long time, it may be very difficult to notice anything positive at first.

It's important to be positive and genuine. Remember even acknowledging a fairly neutral behavior will reap benefits. It is critical to be genuine in your specific praise. Any hint in your voice that you don't feel truly happy about your child finishing that one math problem is going to be noted by your child and heard as criticism.

Describe exactly what your child is doing in the moment in clear detail. If he is using a red crayon, then mention it. If she is going through those multiplication flash cards really fast then tell her what you see. The more details the better. This is what transfers the energy in a positive way.

Notice the process and effort, not just the finished results. If your child is having particular trouble with certain tasks, then it is very helpful to energize each step along the way. Don't wait until the task is completely done or it may never get done! Remember even small steps towards the goal are worthy of being acknowledged.

Be animated—GO BIG in how you say praise statements and punctuate them with high fives, hugs, or even joyful laughter to make them even more powerful. Give it a lot of umph!

Do it A LOT, as often as you remember, when you first get started. The more intensely your child seeks energy through negative behaviors, the more specific praise will be needed to shift the balance. Yes, it will be hard at first, but over time it will become easier as your child's behavior becomes more positive.

Avoid "But" Syndrome. "But" Syndrome is adding the word "But" and then making some type of criticism. "I love that you picked up your shirt, but I wish you would keep your room clean all the time." That "But" is like putting a teaspoon of dirt in a clean, refreshing glass of water. Your child will hear "Your room is a mess." Or worse, "You are messy." You would never give a thirsty child dirty water. Don't dirty up your praise with criticism.

Using these tips will help you to praise your child in the most effective way. Remember the more specific praising you do the less yelling and disciplining you will have to do. Yes, really! Your home can be peaceful again.

An Example

Here is an example that illustrates a typical situation that my clients report all the time, then the same situation with some specific praise.

Just another day at Sally's house - No specific praise

Sally is playing with blocks on the floor building a tower. Mom sees her and says, "Don't forget to put the blocks away when you are done." Sally frowns and continues to build. She finishes her tower and asks mom to admire it. Mom says, "Oh that's nice. Let's put the blocks in the bucket now if you're done."

Sally puts a couple blocks in the bucket. Mom has turned around to do something else and doesn't notice. Sally wanders off to watch TV. Mom finds the blocks later and yells at Sally for not picking them up. Sally refuses to pick them up which results in her getting a lecture on why it's important to pick up toys when you are finished.

Mom and Sally are both feeling annoyed. Sally got her energy fix from mom, but with a negative pattern. Mom is feeling exhausted and frustrated.

Mom's got a brand new bag - With Specific Praise

Sally is playing with blocks on the floor making a tower. Mom says, "Wow! Sally is making a tall tower out of the blocks!" Sally's behavior is fairly neutral, but her mother is praising her good behavior and feeding her positive energy. Sally feels happy and proud of her tower.

When Sally is done building with the blocks, she puts a few in the bucket. Mom says, "Thank you so much for starting to put away your blocks!" Sally smiles as she finishes putting all the blocks in the bucket. Mom says, "All right Sally!" Gives her a high five. "You put ALL the blocks away! Yeah!"

Sally is clapping for herself, and Mom is smiling happily.

See how different these two scenarios are? It sounds simple, yet these patterns can be very hard to break. It takes a concerted effort by parents to stop the negative spiral and begin setting new positive patterns. The more intense the child has become in seeking negative energy the more energy, mom or dad will need to put into positive behaviors.

I have seen some truly miraculous turnarounds in both child behavior, and also in mom and dad's feelings of well being. It is exhausting to be constantly saying, "Stop!" "No!" "Don't do that!" "I've told you a hundred times. . ." Being a parent is not for the faint of heart, but with a little change, everyone will benefit tremendously.

It works everywhere!

I was a preschool teacher working with 2.5 - 3 year olds in a community center. I had 10 kids in the classroom and some days it seemed impossible to get their attention and distract them from the trouble they were about to get into. I found that by praising them for their good behavior even a split second before they reached for that forbidden item would stop them in their tracks. They would look up and smile at me. It was a joy to see. I began training all my parent helpers in the technique too. The number of timeouts that I gave decreased to none most days. I know many children benefited at home as well as at preschool!

Examples of ways to phrase specific praise

I noticed you picked up two action figures and put them in the bin!

I love the way that you followed my directions the first time!

I saw that you shared the blocks with Nick!

I really love the way that you came right away when I called your name!

You did a nice job hanging up your coat and backpack when you came home today!

I like that you used so many colors in your picture! (list the colors)

You are so creative when you color with markers!

You are playing so nicely with your sister right now!

You tied your shoes by yourself so fast!

Exclamations add extra energy

Wow!

Fantastic!

That's amazing

Woohoo!

Yeah!

Yes!

That's so cool!

Gestures

Hugs

High fives

Smiles

Thumbs up

Winks

Nodding approval

Patting shoulder, arm, or back

Silly shocked expression

Clapping

Specific Praise Plan Ahead Worksheet

Praise takes a bit a practice, especially if you've been in the negative energy spiral for a while. Thinking now will make it easier to come up with great ideas on the fly. Take some time now to think about how you will construct your praise, then write your answers below:

Starting the praise sentence is often the harder part since the last part of the sentence is more descriptive of what your child is actually doing in that moment. Below write some sentence starters: (I love the way you. . . I am so proud of how you. . . Look how great you are. . ., etc.)

What are some exclamations that you like to use? (Wow! Cool! Way to go! etc.)

What are some gestures that you enjoy using? (Clapping, high fives, etc.)

Get creative with these. The more genuine and heartfelt the more benefits you will enjoy for your child as well as yourself. I'd love to hear what you come up with. Email me and I will post your ideas on my website so that others can be inspired too! <http://www.counseling-for-moms.com/contact.htm>

Once you get really good at using specific praise with your child, you may even enjoy trying it out on your husband, your boss, or even yourself!

Go ahead! It's fun!

I have found that specific praise is a simple and highly effective way to improve any child's behavior. As an added bonus, it strengthens your relationship, and also raises your child's self-esteem. It does take some practice and, as with all new ideas, it takes a while to make it a habit. Doing the Specific Praise Challenge described below will help you to start putting the rubber to road and make specific praise a positive new habit!

Specific Praise Challenge

I have found this technique to be one of the most powerful that I have used both at home with my own kids, in the classroom, and with my client's families. Give it a try for one week.

Go to <http://www.counselingformoms.com/specificpraise.htm> and fill out the form. A welcome email will be sent to you, click on the link and you will receive helpful tips and reminders each day as well as a worksheet to help you track your progress.

Give your child at least 10 specific praises each day for one week. Then email me at Karen@counselingformoms.com and tell me how it worked out.

Here is a **Quick Reference** guide to print out and post on the refrigerator or even give to teachers and other caregivers.

Quick Reference: Specific Praise

1. **Be Positive!** By praising even the smallest accomplishment, you are helping your child to feel better about herself and her abilities. Be genuine in your feelings of joy at your child's successes.
2. **Be detailed in your descriptions.** The more specific you are the more powerful the praise. Just saying "good job" or "way to go" is not enough. Make sure your child is very clear about exactly what you are praising them for doing. This is a great way to reinforce your expectations for good behavior.
3. **Notice the process and effort, not just the finished product.** By praising a step towards a final goal, you are helping your child to continue working towards the desired goal. In the case study, Sally was motivated to continue putting the blocks away because Mom praised her for **beginning to put the blocks away.**
4. **Be Animated—GO BIG!** Make your voice sound excited in a genuine way. Use exclamation points with your voice. Punctuate your specific praise with high fives, hugs, and "Woohoo's!" The more energy you put in the more your child will benefit.
5. **Do it often.** If your child is very intense—do it A LOT! Match your child's intensity and need for energy with frequency of specific praise. If your child has problems in a specific area such as homework, be sure to praise every effort no matter how small in the right direction. This will motivate him further to keep going and pick up the pace.
6. **Avoid "But" Syndrome** – Don't add the word "but" onto the ends of your praise statements. For example, "Mikey you did that math problem correctly, but you did it awfully slow." Your child will only hear that he is slow. Ouch!

Wanting more?

While specific praise is a wonderful start, there is a lot more that may be needed in order to fully break negative behavior patterns in your family. Each family is unique. While there are many techniques that can be helpful, sometimes you need help that fits your particular situation.

This is where Calm the Chaos Parent Coaching can be just what the doctor ordered. (Especially if your doctor mentioned that you need to get “Behavior Modification”) Calm the Chaos Parent Coaching is custom designed for your particular challenges, personality, and abilities. Visit <http://www.counselingformoms.com/parentcoaching.htm> for more information.



About the Author

Since 2002, Karen DeBolt has been helping moms struggling with chaos at home who want their children to be happy and successful. Karen has a master’s degree in Counseling Psychology with a child and family emphasis.

Even more importantly, she has three master teachers at home—her three children, two who have special needs. Karen has struggled with her own children in the past and was able through a lot of studying, experimenting, counseling and persistence to calm the chaos in her home. Karen is passionate about helping other moms to avoid the long struggle and start enjoying parenting again.

Karen lives in Hillsboro, Oregon with her second husband, Dan, her children and a Samoyed named “E.” If you’ve seen any white fluff floating around the old website, now you know why!

She invites you to share this information with friends and family members who may benefit by sending them to her website: <http://www.counseling-for-moms.com>. So that they can also get the free newsletter.

I hope you found this information helpful.

All the best,

Karen