

Are You a Highlighter or a Permanent Marker Parent?: Promoting Healthy Child Development by Highlighting Positive Behaviors¹

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Deciding how to parent can sometimes feel like having our own blank art canvas just waiting to be designed and created. Whether you are currently a parent, a parent-to-be, a parent of one, or a parent of three, it can be difficult to determine which parental strategies will work best for you. The strategies your own parents used might be considered outdated or ineffective now. New strategies, however, may seem too intimidating, and you might be uncertain regarding their effectiveness. How you nurture and care for your new addition to your family may come naturally, but this new bundle of joy will also require a lot of effort, attention, consistency, and care. Focusing on how to promote the positive aspects of your child's development to prevent frustrations and possible maltreatment from leaving a permanent mark is paramount. Might we suggest choosing to parent using a highlighter instead of a permanent marker?

Helpful Information Highlighter Parents...

Identify and encourage. A key role of a highlighter parent is to brightly identify which behaviors are not only healthy but are also preferred by you. For example, as a parent, it is crucial to establish your behavioral expectations with your children. When your children display the desired behavior,

act quickly to highlight what they are doing right! This will encourage your children to naturally want to perform these behaviors in the future. Complimenting and encouraging your children will produce greater rewards than those that are the result of reprimanding.

Recognize where their child excels. Certain characteristics and behaviors may come more naturally to your child than others. For example, some children may have an easier time expressing their emotions physically instead of verbally. If your child has a challenging time identifying how they are feeling, it is unfair to ask them to "explain" to you how they are feeling. Instead, you might consider allowing them alternative ways to express themselves whether it be through drawing a picture or engaging in a physical activity. Here is another example: Expecting your child to perform a task they struggle with will not allow them to achieve your combined goals. Make sure to highlight their strengths and be patient in the areas that require further nurturing, effort, and growth.

Specifically acknowledge actions performed by their child and expand on how they can grow. When your child performs a positive behavior, it is important to specifically acknowledge and describe what is pleasing and appropriate about this behavior. For example, if you accidentally clip the

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leg of a chair with your foot and subsequently spill something on the floor, your child might say, “Oh no! Are you okay?” As the parent, you can acknowledge this behavior by responding with something like, “Yes, I’m okay, thank you for checking on me; that was very kind of you!” You might even choose to continue the conversation by asking your child if they could please help you clean up what you have spilled. This can help them feel included and increase their feelings of compassion and capability.

Listen intently to show their child they are valued.

Parents are susceptible to becoming overwhelmed with the demands of parenthood and, as a result, often neglect meeting their own needs. A highlighter parent learns how to meet their own needs so they can excel at being able to fully immerse themselves in the present with their children. Although being present may not occur with every interaction, highlighter parents focus on “capturing” current moments rather than focusing too much on the past or the future. When you give your child your undivided attention, it reinforces that they are valued, and what they say, feel, and do are valued by you.

Lead by example. When it comes to parenting, and relationships in general, developing and modeling strong character traits matter. As the parent, setting reasonable and attainable expectations is critical to helping your child increase their ability to gain self-confidence, self-identity, and self-efficacy, and to learn how to act in positive ways. As a highlighter parent, you cannot simply ask or direct your children to behave in healthy ways. Instead, you must set this example yourself. “Do as I do, not just as I say,” is a good rule of thumb to live by. If your goal is to raise kind, compassionate, and respectful children, you must, as their role model, exude and emulate those qualities in your interactions with them. Of course, no one is perfect. We are human, and we all make mistakes. Despite our many weaknesses, striving to do our best to be an example for our children is the best way to support them in their journey of learning how to behave in positive ways. In fact, it is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

Permanent Marker Parents...

Are quick to react harshly. If you find yourself reacting to negative or unwanted behavior in haste and in a harsh manner, you may be exhibiting characteristics of a permanent marker parent. To avoid these responses, consider the following:

- Take a few moments to step away from the situation and calm down before offering a response.

- Talk in a soft tone to calm yourself and your child down, and to prevent yourself from yelling.

Focus on shaming the child, not the misbehavior. As a parent, it is quick and easy to respond to children with “No” or “Stop doing that.” Responding with helpful feedback requires patience, skill, and a little bit of grace. It may take extra effort, but going the extra mile to highlight specific misbehaviors that need to change while reinforcing to your child that they are a “good” kid will protect them from feeling badly about themselves rather than feeling guilty about their misbehaviors (which is a good thing!). Mistakes happen; a little love goes a long way.

Are consciously preoccupied and are not attentive to those around them. Our children are constantly searching for our attention, and they will go to great lengths to attain it. Ignoring our children and not investing in them by giving them our time and attention are characteristics of permanent marker parents. Allowing our children to do whatever they want with little guidance and few boundaries promotes misbehavior and a lack of self-esteem. Permanent marker parents need to learn how to put a cap on their preoccupations and to push the mute button on their cell phones. To become a highlighter parent, we must “make the time” to tune in to our child.

Leave permanent negative effects on their children. Permanent marker parents can leave emotional marks on their children that can sometimes last a lifetime, constantly reminding them of what they are doing wrong. Put simply, negative interactions with our children can have lasting effects on them and us. Instead of forcing our bad mood or bad day on our child, we can choose to get outside of ourselves to promote positivity with them, highlight their individuality and goodness, and let our children’s confidence and positive behaviors flourish. Every child needs to feel like they are both lovable and capable.

Things You Can Use Going Beyond “Good Job”

The connection between you as a parent and your child is innate, but it will also always need to be nurtured and maintained. As adults, we can get trapped in the mundane demands of our everyday lives. As a result, we can find ourselves getting into the habit of responding to others without significant thought and attention. Unfortunately, this pattern of communication may also spill over to, and negatively impact, the children in our lives. For example, as our children seek our approval through an activity they have completed, an artwork they have created, or a physical

skill they have just achieved, we can catch ourselves responding with a simple statement like, “Good job!” This form of non-specific praise does not offer any significant feedback to our children as to what they are so enthusiastic about showing us.

Consider the number of times you use non-specific feedback when speaking to others. With constant replies of “Good job” or “Nice work,” a permanent marker parent may leave an indelible effect on a child’s belief that what they accomplish goes unnoticed and is insignificant to the role models in their lives.

Alternatively, in order to clearly identify which behaviors are wanted, try becoming a highlighter parent by utilizing encouragement consistently throughout your interactions with your children. Remember, positive reinforcement helps us as parents identify and encourage the *specific* desired behaviors we want to increase in frequency.

Table 1 provides an opportunity for you to physically record these interactions during your week. If you are experiencing greater instances of non-specific praise vs. specific praise, take the next step to consider how you can turn insignificant praise into significant, specific, and meaningful encouragement by highlighting the positive behaviors of your children, (e.g., “I noticed you put your toys away in the bins where they go”).

Setting the Example

Although it is crucial to highlight the positive behaviors and attributes of others, especially our children, consider yourself first. This powerful counsel is highlighted by flight attendants who instruct parents in case of emergency to put their own oxygen masks on first and then proceed to help their children with theirs. Why? You are your children’s first role model and are more than likely the most significant individual they look to when they consider how they will act.

When promoting positive behaviors with your children and yourself, consider this: It is easy to find ways to criticize ourselves as parents and to put ourselves down by telling ourselves we are not “good enough” (i.e., by using a metaphorical permanent marker to “mark-up” all of the things we would change about ourselves until we are covered with annotations). In such instances, if we can catch ourselves by putting the lid on our permanent marker and then taking out our highlighters, our most positive attributes can then become our focal point. We can then better support our children to be the best versions of themselves as well.

Consider what you can do to highlight yourself. Take a moment to self-reflect and think about the positive behaviors you display and how consistent you are in displaying those behaviors to your children. Go ahead and identify your *Highlighter Parent* and *Permanent Marker Parent Qualities* in Table 2 by checking the “Yes” or “No” box, and then reflect on how you can do more of what works and less of what does not work as a parent.

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Table 1. Tracking Sheet for Week of _____: Use of Specific vs. Non-Specific Praise.

Types of Praise	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Total
Specific Praise i.e., "Thank you for using your inside voice"								
Non-Specific Praise i.e., "Good job"								

Table 2. Highlighter vs. Permanent Marker Parent Qualities: Self-Reflection on How to Improve.

Parental Qualities	Yes	No	Self-Reflection: How can you improve?
Do: Identify and encourage			
Do: Identify where your child excels			
Do: Specifically acknowledge positive behavior			
Do: Listen intently			
Do: Lead by example			
Don't: React quickly and harshly			
Don't: Focus on shaming your child; focus on the misbehavior			
Don't: Be preoccupied or inattentive			
Don't: Leave permanent negative effects			