# What to say when your toddler shows you a drawing

*"My three-year-old holds up every drawing and waits. I say "You're so clever!" on autopilot. Is there something better to say?"*

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're so clever! You're a real artist."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You used lots of blue, and you kept going right to the edge. Tell me about it."

The instinct is to tell your child what they are: clever, an artist, the best. It is loving, and it is aimed at the child instead of at the drawing.

## What the research found at this age

In a small experiment with four-year-olds, children played a drawing game with puppets and were praised in one of two ways: "You are a good drawer" or "You did a good job drawing." Then the drawings started to go wrong. The children told they were good drawers coped less well with the mistakes than the children praised for doing a good job. The difference was one small change of words.

A second study recorded 53 families at home when their children were between 14 and 38 months old. The more of a parent's praise was about effort and actions ("you worked hard on that"), the more the children believed, at seven and eight, that ability can grow. Praise of the child's traits was not linked to the opposite belief. That is a link in a small sample, not proof that the words caused it.

The American Academy of Pediatrics gives the everyday version: notice good behaviour, praise success and good tries, and be specific about what your child did.

## What the words do

Take 1 is a verdict on your child. Take 2 is a description of their work: the colour, the effort of going right to the edge. "Tell me about it" hands the conversation back, so your child does the talking and you do the noticing. You don't need to judge the drawing at all.

## If you live in two homes

Each home will praise in its own way, and a child can live with two styles. You don't need the other parent to change their words. If your child brings something made at the other home, describe it the way you would one made in yours. That tells them their work is welcome here, wherever it was made.

## In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

## Sources

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*This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.*