

Praise and Parenting

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What happens when a child, since before they could walk, constantly hears that she's smart? Does self-awareness of one's smartness translate into fearless confidence later in childhood? Or does it instill fearful hesitance to try new things, fearing failure?

Researchers have long noticed that large numbers of the smartest children severely underestimate their own ability. They lack confidence in their ability to tackle new things. Smart children, to whom many things come very quickly, often give up just as quickly when they don't.

Children afflicted with this lack of perceived competence adopt lower standards for success, and expect less of themselves. They're often too quick to tell themselves, "I'm not good at this", and too quick to divide the world into things they are naturally good at, and things they are not. They underrate the importance of effort, and they overrate how much help they need from a parent.

According to a survey conducted by Columbia University, 85 percent of American parents think it's important to tell their kids that they're smart. Early and often, and every chance they get, today's parents praise their children for their smarts, some going so far as to send their kids to school with affirming handwritten notes in their lunchboxes. Kids today are saturated with messages that they're doing great – that they are great, innately so. They have what it takes.

The presumption held by parents is that if a child believes he's smart – having been told so, repeatedly – he won't be intimidated by new academic challenges. The constant praise is meant to be an angel on the shoulder, ensuring that children do not sell their talents short. But a growing body of research strongly suggests that it might be the other way around. Giving kids the label of "smart" does NOT prevent them from underperforming. It might actually be causing it.

Researchers have studied children in school classrooms, and measured the effect of praising kids for their intelligence ("you're so smart at this"), as compared to the effect of praising them for their effort ("you must have worked really hard at this"). What is consistently found is that children praised for their *effort* subsequently choose harder tasks, while those praised for their intelligence choose easier ones. Over and again, the "smart" kids take the easy way out.

The adverse effect of praise for innate intelligence on performance holds true for students of every socio-economic class. It hits both boys and girls – the very brightest girls especially, who are the most likely to collapse after failure.

When we praise children for their intelligence, we tell them that this is the name of the game: look smart, don't risk making mistakes. And that's what children do: choose to look smart and avoid the risk of being embarrassed. Children praised repeatedly for being smart assume failure is evidence that they aren't really smart at all.

All too often, those who think that innate intelligence is the key to success too often discount the importance of effort. I am smart, the kid's reasoning goes, therefore I don't need to put out effort. Expending effort becomes stigmatized – it's public proof that you can't cut it on your natural gifts.

Emphasizing and praising *effort* instead gives a child a variable that they can control. They come to see themselves as in control of their success. Praising natural intelligence takes it out of the child's control, and it provides no good recipe for responding to a failure.

So, instead of saying "you're so smart", instead say "I like how you keep trying". Keep praise specific, rather than general, so that a child knows exactly what she did to earn the praise, and thus can get more.

Teach kids that *intelligence is something developed*, rather than innate. Kids taught thusly are more likely to make effort, to strive no matter the challenge. Teach kids that the brain is a muscle, and that giving it a harder workout makes you smarter. This concept alone has been shown to greatly improve school-aged children's study habits and grades.

The effects of praise can vary significantly, depending on the praise given. To be effective, researchers have found, praise needs to be specific, credible, and sincere. Again, intelligence alone should not be praised. Effort, talent, insight, intention, humility, tolerance, and an openness to criticism and a determination to learn from it are what should be praised.

Kids should be taught an appreciation for what is noble, and contempt for what is base. And they should be taught a love of knowledge for its own sake, not for the rewards it might bring.

Kids must be allowed to fail, and to learn from their failures. Today, kids' shirts and blouses (not to mention parents' bumper stickers and social networking pages) have become bulletin boards for a hodge-podge of ribbons, pins, and awards that commemorate everything but real achievement. But if we are constantly rewarding mediocrity, how will children learn the difference between excellent and ordinary?

Only young children – under the age of seven – take praise at face value: older children are just as suspicious of it as adults. By the age of twelve, children believe that earning praise

from a teacher is not a sign that you did well – it's actually a sign that you lack ability and the teacher thinks you need extra encouragement. They've picked up the pattern: kids who are falling behind get drowned in praise.

A teacher who praises a child may be unwittingly sending the message that the student reached the limit of his innate ability, while a teacher who criticizes a pupil conveys the message that he can improve his performance even further. Teachers should be honest if they feel a child is capable of better work. Teachers should not be there to make children *feel* better, but to make them *do* better.

In other words, praise is important, but not vacuous praise. It has to be based on the real thing – some skill or talent they have. Once children hear praise they interpret as meritless, they discount not just the insincere praise, but sincere praise as well.

Decades of research has also shown that praised students become risk-averse with advancing grade levels. Liberal use of praise correlates with shorter task persistence, more eye-checking with the teacher, and inflected speech such that answers have the intonation of questions.

When students frequently praised for their intelligence transition into junior high, some who'd done well in elementary school inevitably struggle in the larger and more demanding environment. Those who equated their earlier success with their innate ability surmise they've been dumb all along. Their grades never recover because the likely key to their recovery – increasing effort – they view as just further proof of their failure. They are also more likely to turn to cheating.

When they get to college, heavily-praised students commonly drop out of classes rather than suffer a mediocre grade, and they have a hard time picking a major – they're afraid to commit to something because they're afraid of not succeeding.

Research also shows that children frequently-praised for intelligence get more competitive and more interested in tearing others down as they get older. Image-maintenance becomes their primary concern. Of kids praised frequently for intelligence, 40 percent lie about their grades when asked, inflating their scores. Of kids praised repeatedly for their effort, very few lie.

Offering praise has become a sort of panacea for the anxieties of modern parenting. Out of our children's lives from breakfast to dinner, we turn it up a notch when we get home. In those few hours together, we want them to hear the things we can't say during the day – *We are in your corner, we are here for you, we believe in you, you are so smart.*

In a similar way, we put our children in high-pressure environments, seeking out the best schools we can find, then we use the constant praise to soften the intensity of those environments. We expect so much of them, but we hide our expectations behind constant glowing praise.

Kids today are being raised in an age where self-esteem is everything. They're told how great they are from K to 12, and graduate without the faintest idea of what greatness is, or demands. Greatness is always there and always theirs, and failure is always someone else's fault.

Brushing aside failure and just focusing on the positive is not being a good parent. A child who comes to believe failure is something so terrible that the family can't acknowledge its existence is a child deprived of the opportunity to discuss mistakes who therefore can't learn from them.

Our job as parents is to instill in our children a firm belief that the way to bounce back from failure is to work harder (i.e. *try, try again*). The ability to repeatedly respond to failure by exerting more effort – instead of simply giving up – is a trait well-studied in psychology. People with this trait – persistence – rebound well and can sustain their motivation through long periods of delayed gratification. A person who grows up getting too frequent rewards will not have persistence, because they'll quit when the rewards disappear. They become “praise junkies”.

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What's the bottom line? Love your kids unconditionally. But unconditional love does not require offering unconditional praise.

While there's no mistaking the allure of a life outlook in which you'll make every block, get every job you apply for, and win the heart of every man or woman who catches your eye, teaching your children such an outlook does not prepare them for adulthood. And preparing our children for adulthood is our first and largest responsibility as parents.

Do not cling to the absurd notion of “Of course you can do it”. Instead, the best slogan to live by isn't all that inspiring, but it's the truth: Expect failure, but keep trying. Joy is found in the striving. And with persistence, you will have successes – savor them and treasure them, for you've earned them through hard work.

But don't wait long to move on to the next challenge. Life is full of challenges. Most will surprise you. Some will get the best of you. Learn from your mistakes, learn to be humble. Learn that everyone around you is everyday tackling their challenges. Learn never to judge them for their failures. No person should be judged by his lowest point, for his biggest failure. Understand all this, and you'll be wiser, and happier, in the end.