

# Why Praise Can Be Bad for Kids

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"Wow, you got an A without even studying."

"Your drawing is wonderful -- you're my little Picasso."

"Keep it up and you'll be the next Peyton Manning."

If you're like most parents, you offer praise to your children believing it is the key to their success -- those flattering words can boost a child's self-esteem and performance. But according to a new study, praise may do more harm than good.

For the study, researchers divided 128 fifth-graders into groups and gave them a simple IQ test. One group was told it did really well and must be very smart. The other group was told it did really well and must have worked hard. One group was praised for intelligence, the other for effort.

Asked if they wanted to take a slightly harder test, the kids praised for their intelligence were reluctant. Of those praised for their effort, however, 90 percent were eager for a more challenging task. And on a final test the effort group performed significantly better than the group praised for its intelligence.

Many of the kids who had been labeled "smart" performed worst of all. The "hard workers" got the message that they could improve their scores by trying harder, but the "smart" kids believed they should do well without any effort.

## **Praise Can Bring Down Performance**

"Contrary to popular belief, praising children's intelligence did not give them confidence and did not make them learn better," said Carol Dweck, a professor of developmental psychology at Stanford University and author of "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success."

Her surprising research, which she has repeated with hundreds of kids from all socioeconomic backgrounds, was published recently in the journal *Child Development*.

Dweck found that children's performance worsens if they always hear how smart they are. Kids who get too much praise are less likely to take risks, are highly sensitive to failure and are more likely to give up when faced with a challenge.

"Parents should take away the fact that they are not giving their children a gift when they tell them how brilliant and talented they are," Dweck says. "They are making them believe they are valued only for being intelligent, and it makes them not want to learn."

When parents, teachers and coaches label a child, they tell the child that he or she is the label and is judged for this label, not for his actual capabilities. The child becomes risk-averse and doesn't want to chance messing up and being labeled "dumb." In other words, a "smart" child often believes that expending effort is something only "dumb" kids have to do.

## **Be Specific About Praise and Don't Be Afraid to Withhold It**

The key is to be specific about the praise you give.

"Parents should praise children for their effort, their concentration, their strategies," Dweck said.

For instance, next time your son gets an A on an exam for which you know he hardly studied, tell him you think he should try a tougher class next semester. When he scores the winning touchdown, instead of telling him he's the best player on the team, ask him how he trained to run so fast.

The flip side is that parents must be honest when their children do not perform as well as their peers. If your daughter finishes last at the track meet, and you know it is because she's younger and less experienced than other competitors, it is better to tell her that she did not deserve to win because she still needs improvement than to tell her you thought she was the best, no matter what the judges said.

But it's hard to refrain from telling children how smart or perfect they are.

"We believe that by telling them they're smart, they'll believe they're smart, and if they believe they're smart, they'll attack their schoolwork with confidence," said Po Bronson, a father of two who wrote the cover story in the current issue of New York Magazine, "How Not to Talk to Your Kids: The Inverse Power of Praise." Writing the article forced Bronson to re-evaluate his own parenting techniques after learning of Dweck's research.

"I was frightened of this idea that telling a child that they're smart makes them think that effort is only for dummies, and if you're smart you shouldn't have to rely on effort," Bronson said.

It has not been easy, but Bronson and his wife have changed their ways.

"I have found that I just need to be honest," Bronson said. "Being honest is going to serve us better in the long run."

### **Tips for Parents**

- Avoid labels. Praising for effort sends the message that your child has the power to improve and change, but labeling him "smart" gives him little control over changing how he is perceived. Be mindful of labeling yourself ("I can't do my taxes -- I'm terrible at math") and others ("Your gymnastics partner is such a klutz").
- Teach kids from an early age that the brain is a muscle that can be strengthened with practice. This sends the message that kids can directly affect their intelligence, which may empower unmotivated teenagers.
- Lose the guilt. Parents often praise their kids to make themselves feel good, or to protect their kids from failure. But it's critical for parents to help their kids to learn to cope with setbacks and to help them focus on ways to improve.