

The Value of Praising Effort, Not Ability

As parents, when you see your child reach some goal or accomplish something impressive, what do you immediately want to say?

“Wowww! Tommy that was incredible! You’re the smartest/fastest/most talented kid in the entire universe! No one even hold a candle to you!”

And you mean it. You love your child so much, you can hardly help yourself from praising them.

That’s a good thing. Children need our support and have a deep emotional and psychological desire to hear our encouragement on a daily basis.

The issue I want to discuss here is not our motives but the words we choose and what we focus on in our praise.

A New approach to praise

When we praise talent, we make it the focal point. When we say, “Rebecca, you are so smart. How did you get so smart?!” our intention is to build up Rebecca’s self-esteem and give her the confidence she needs to accomplish future goals.

The problem is that in Rebecca’s mind we have tied her worth to her capacity for being “smart.” So what happens when, inevitably, Rebecca runs into a problem she cannot handle? Or finds a subject that is difficult for her? Or meets another child who is “smarter” than she is?

In Ellen Galinsky’s book *Mind in the Making*, she recommends that parents – and teachers! – focus their praise on things children can control rather than on traits like intelligence.

This is of critical importance for the coming school year. Rather than say, “Sally, you are the smartest math student I’ve ever met,” instead try saying, “Sally, I saw how hard you worked on that problem. It wasn’t easy, but you didn’t give up. Nice job!”

See the difference? In the second example, Sally finds approval for her effort, making her want to work even harder when she encounters future difficulties.

A Telling Case Study

Galinsky shares a telling study conducted by her colleagues in which a group of children were all given the same set of math problems, but they received different forms of feedback. The control group was only told how many they got right or wrong, while one group was praised for their intelligence and the third group was praised for their effort.

After the first test was over and the praise was given, the children were then asked whether they wanted to take another test like the one they just took or if they wanted to take a new, more challenging set of problems.

Guess what happened? The majority of children from the group that was praised for their effort chose to try out the harder test. But the group that was praised for their intelligence almost unanimously chose to take a test similar to the one they had just succeeded on.

Even more telling, the children were also told to report their original scores on the tests to an adult they did not know who was assigned to record the scores. Sadly, many of the children who were praised for their intelligence lied about their scores and inflated them to the adult, even though they didn't know them and would likely never meet again.

Isn't this fascinating? Those children associated their worth with their ability to get the questions right. They only wanted challenges where they could achieve more pats on the head and gold stars. Even worse, they were ashamed of their mistakes.

Getting Back on the horse

In contrast, the group who was praised for their effort was proud of their ability to "get back on the horse" and take on new challenges. They were less concerned with getting it right the first time and instead valued their perseverance.

The lessons here for parents and teachers abound and should be obvious: our praise is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yet the reality is we most likely have patterns and habits deeply engrained in us. So it will take real, concentrated effort to break this cycle. But we must do it.

If this is difficult for you, as it is for most of us well-meaning parents and teachers who love to encourage children, begin with baby steps. This week, try the following three things:

- The next time your child or student shows ability at something, try praising their effort rather than their ability.
- Transform your "You're so smart/talented/perfect..." phrases and replace them with "I'm so proud of you for sticking with that task / not giving up / working hard until you figured it out."
- Help your child or student see the value in taking on challenges. It is a lesson that will help them throughout their life. Don't let them take the easy way out but encourage them to continue striving for their goal.

Continue giving praise! They certainly need it! But don't fall into the self-esteem trap of thinking kids must be constantly praised for their ability. That only makes them psychologically dependent on self-esteem boosting comments from adults. Instead, focus on their effort and their willingness to try new challenges and you will be giving them a gift they will carry with them for life.

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