

The Problem with Praise

by Dr. Jenn Berman

Emma, who has just learned to crawl, moves across the room showing new skill and coordination. “Good girl!” exclaims her mother.

Jake comes home from third grade with an A on his math test. “You’re so smart,” says his Dad, beaming with pride.

Chris missed hitting the ball every time it was thrown to him during his baseball game. “You’re a great baseball player,” his Mom tells him encouragingly.

New studies show the praise these parents are giving may be doing more harm than good. We want so much to encourage our children that sometimes we just throw out praise unconsciously, lavishly and, even worse, undeservedly. We want our children to feel good about themselves; to believe that they can accomplish anything they put their minds to and to feel special.

A series of recently released studies by Carol Dweck at Columbia University shows the negative effects of certain types of praise. In a study of fourth graders, Dweck gave a simple test to the students. When they finished, they were given their scores and a single line of praise. Half were praised for their intelligence (“You must be smart at this”) and half were praised for their effort (“You must have worked really hard”). Then the students were given a choice between an easier and a more difficult puzzle for the second round. Of the children who were praised for their effort, 90 percent chose the more difficult one whereas the majority of the children praised for intelligence chose the easy one forgoing the more challenging work.

In another study done by Dweck with fifth graders, the children were given a test designed for a much higher grade level and were expected to fail. The researchers found that students who had been praised for the



effort assumed they simply hadn’t focused hard enough whereas the students praised for their intelligence assumed they weren’t really smart at all. When they were given a second round of tests, the group praised for their effort improved by 30 percent and the group praised for intelligence actually did 20 percent worse than they had on the original test.

Dweck’s studies speak to the importance of parents focusing on process over outcome as well as the perils of praise. According to Dweck, “emphasizing effort gives a child a variable they can control. They come to see themselves as in control of their success.” She believes that labeling a child “smart” doesn’t prevent her from underperforming. It actually may create it. Children who are given the “smart” label become so concerned with keeping that image that they are not willing to take a risk or experience failure, which is so important to learning.

Me, Me, Me!

There is rising concern from experts that all this unmerited praise is creating a generation of narcissists. A 2006 study that administered the Narcissistic Personality Inventory to more than 16,000 college students found that two-thirds had above average scores, which is 30 percent higher than a similar

sampling taken in 1982. When children who are accustomed to receiving praise and are rewarded constantly enter the work force they are in for a rude awakening. As a result, they are likely to have trouble performing and ultimately keeping a job.

Praise That Helps

All this research doesn’t mean that we should stop praising our kids altogether. To go to the opposite extreme can be just as detrimental. The key for parents is to give thoughtful praise that reflects awareness of your child’s accomplishments and efforts. I recommend parents endeavor to give their praise the following qualities:

Be specific.

Emphasize the effort, not the outcome.

Be genuine and believable.

Children need to have parents mirror positive yet accurate reflections of who they are. We owe it to our kids not to pay lip service to them by giving false compliments. Often parents resort to saying things they don’t believe to be true because they don’t want their child to feel bad; but an important part of developing resilience is coping with disappointment.

Instead of...	Try...
Good girl!	That was great how you put one hand in front of the other and crawled!
You’re so smart.	You must have worked really hard to get such a good grade.
You’re a great baseball player.	It was great how you didn’t give up even when you struck out. That must have been difficult.

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