

Careful with that Praise

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Praise is a good thing, right? Shouldn't parents and teachers praise their children? Actually, it's not that simple, as Stanford professor Carol Dweck reveals in her new book, Mindsets.

For example, consider these statements spoken to a child by a well-intentioned parent or teacher: 1) I can't believe how quickly you wrote that essay; you are so **intelligent!** 2) Holy Cow! Your drawing is great! You are so **talented!** On the surface, the adult is simply praising the child, building up her confidence, right? But put yourself in the child's place and consider the messages she might be receiving: 1) I am only "intelligent" when I learn something "quickly"; 2) If I want this adult to continue to think I'm a "talented" artist, I better not risk exploring new forms of art.

The concern here is that children can easily become addicted to the praise of adults. When this happens, like good addicts, kids will do almost anything to keep the praise coming, including avoiding risk and challenge. The result is that learning for learning sake is no longer important. This is tragic because, labels aside, what parents and teachers most want is that children and young people receive encouragement to explore, take risks, and come up against their limits while certain of their goodness, their wholeness.

Now, consider the outcome if a parent or teacher, instead of praising a child's intelligence or talent, were to focus attention on the *process* involved in the child's endeavors. Now, the praise might sound something like this: "I am intrigued by your essay on democracy and am wondering what inspired you to write it?" or "I am fascinated by your painting. Can you tell me about the colors you choose?" In these instances the adult is focusing attention on characteristics that the child can control and, in so doing, the child is encouraged to reflect, exert effort, and try new things.

The effects of how appreciation is expressed was dramatically illustrated in a study conducted by Dweck and colleagues involving 400 fifth-graders and three tests. The first test consisted of ten problems from an IQ test. After the test each student received individual praise, but not the same type of praise! One group was told: "You did very well; **you must be really smart.**" And a second group was told: "You did very well; **you must have worked really hard.**" In other words, the students in the first group were made to feel that they had a special gift (intelligence), whereas those in the second group were praised for applying effort—something they had control over. In reality, kids in both groups had the same overall average scores on this first test.

When it came time for the second test—which was purposely made very difficult—none of the students did well and they were each individually told as much. This, no doubt, was a setback for the kids who had been previously praised as "intelligent," undermining their belief in their innate smartness. On the other hand, the kids who had been praised earlier for their "effort" were positioned to conclude that their poor performance on this second test simply meant that they needed to apply more effort—something they could control. Indeed, when the third and final test was given (similar in difficulty to the very first test) this effort-praised group scored 30% higher, on average, than they had the first time around, whereas the scores for the group praised for intelligence actually dropped 20%.

Dweck's work cautions that heaping bucket loads of praise on children can actually undermine, rather than boost, self esteem. And, worse, it can snuff out a child's innate curiosity and hunger for learning new things.

Deep down children don't want to be told that they are "stars" or that they are "brilliant." This just creates insecurity. What they most long for is acceptance as the whole, innately loving and precious beings that each of them is. When this unconditional acceptance is present, adults naturally express genuine interest in the lives of children and the children naturally flourish.