

The Most Productive Ways to Use Praise

Recently, I have had conversations with several parents whose children lack self-confidence and are not motivated academically. These parents were concerned that their children were not living up to their *true potential*. While there are many different reasons that children don't always function to their true cognitive potential, one common misconception seems to be that increasing praise increases motivation. Most would agree that praise is crucial to academic success and student's learning. When provided correctly praise can help a child feel more confident to tackle life's challenges. But is more really better and is all praise equal?

Some parents I have spoken to are frustrated by the fact that their child has such negative self-perceptions despite the fact that they lavish them with so much praise. How can the child feel so down on himself/herself when others are constantly praising them in an effort to make them feel good? How can a child have poor self-esteem when they are continuously told how "smart" or "perfect" they are? Obviously for some children, the praise is not having the intended effect. We may need to take a look at the way we are using praise and how we can use it more productively.

Let's consider a study I recently read by Dr. Carol Dweck, a professor of developmental psychology at Stanford University. Elementary school children were given a simple IQ test. One group was told that they did exceptionally well and must be very smart. The other group was told that they did really well and must have worked very hard. These students were then asked if they would like to take a slightly harder test. The groups of students praised for their intelligence were reluctant to participate. However, those praised for their effort were eager to take up the next challenge. Furthermore, on a final test, the "effort" group performed significantly better than the group praised for their intelligence. The hypothesis is that the children praised for being hard workers got the message that they could improve their scores by trying harder. Those praised for being "smart" believed they should do well without any effort. Dr. Dweck reported that contrary to popular belief, praising children's intelligence does not give them more confidence and does not make them learn better. Dr. Dweck indicated that children's performance worsens if they always hear how smart they are. Kids who get too much praise may be highly sensitive to failure and are more likely to give up on challenging tasks.

How can we use praise in the most productive manner? Here are some basic concepts to keep in mind for giving productive praise:

- **Be sincere and specific** General, global praise (e.g. "you're so smart" or "good job") has been likened to a "hot air balloon" or an empty container that continually needs to be filled. This type of praise makes a child hungry for more praise, because there's no substance in the praise. It doesn't share the details of what created the success that the child is being praised for. It may make a child fearful that they can not recreate what they are being praised for. Specific praise focuses on the details of what someone did well so that they can recreate the same success.

- **Praise kids only for things that they have the ability to change.** If we praise children for innate ability or intelligence, we send the message that these are things people have or don't have. Teach children that the brain is like a muscle that can be strengthened with practice. Children don't understand what they did to be smart. This may leave kids feeling helpless when they make mistakes. What's the point of trying to improve if your mistakes indicate your lack of intelligence? It's best to praise children for things like effort or strategies they are using. These are things that will make them successful in the future. Furthermore, if they are unsuccessful, they will attribute it to their need for more effort or a need to change strategy, instead of an innate fault of their own.
- **Use descriptions that convey realistic, attainable standards.** A good example of descriptive praise is, "I like the way you gave specific facts in your essay to support your opinion". This praise gives specific feedback. In contrast, consider the statement, "That was amazing! I've never heard anyone play that flute like that before." This type of praise concludes that your standards are almost superhuman. How can someone possibly live up to those standards? Unrealistically high standards can become a source of pressure and make kids feel inadequate.
- **Be careful about praising kids for achievements that come easily.** This type of praise may be taken as insincere. Since your child knows that they did not have to work hard, they may believe you are patronizing them or think they are not capable of doing more complex tasks.
- **Avoid praise that compares your child to others.** Kids who are accustomed to social comparison praise are poor losers. Once kids stop hearing that their outperforming their peers, they give up and lose motivation. When the goal is to compete with others, they lack intrinsic motivation for a task. They may avoid challenges so that they don't risk failure.
- **Be careful for over praising kids for doing what they already love to do.** Research has shown that when you praise kids for doing things they enjoy, it may reduce their motivation. Things may become a chore tied to praise, and if the praise stops, the motivation for doing the behavior stops.

Praise can be a powerful form of encouragement. However there is a large amount of research that concludes that if used incorrectly, praise could backfire and ultimately undermine a child's motivation. We need to focus on praising those attributes that are basic to life's success such as perseverance, behavior, attitude, effort, and concentration. Keep the aforementioned concepts in mind the next time you are about to praise your child to ensure that your praise has its intended effect.

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