

How Praising Children Teaches Them Not to Learn

Talk to a youth sport's coach and he might say today's [kids are un-coachable](#). Ask an exasperated teacher and she might say today's kids don't know how to learn. Listen to parents and they might say they have tried building their child's confidence but to no avail.

Famed Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck wants us to understand that the language we use with our children is fueling their resistance to learning. Dweck advises parents, teachers, and coaches to "keep away from...praise that judges their intelligence or talent."

In her book [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#), Dweck asks us to consider messages such as "You learned that so quickly! You're so smart!" or "You're so brilliant, you got an A without even studying!" Most parents, Dweck observes, see such messages "as supportive, esteem-boosting messages." Such messages do not help.

Dweck's research suggests the child hears, *"If I don't learn something quickly, I'm not smart. I'd better quit studying or they won't think I'm brilliant."*

Instead, if you want your child to develop good learning skills, praise "what they accomplished through practice, study, persistence, and good strategies." We can talk to our child in a "way that recognizes and shows interest in their efforts and choices." Dweck gives this example: "You really studied for your test and your improvement shows it. You read the material over several times, you outlined it, and you tested yourself on it. It really worked!"

Dweck is clear that not all processes yield good outcomes:

In all of our research on praise, we indeed praise the process, but we tie it to the outcome, that is, to children's learning, progress, or achievements. Children need to understand that engaging in that process helped them learn.

Dweck is not for accepting shoddy work because someone tried. If you're teaching someone whose work is falling short, show appreciation for their efforts but work with them to help identify areas for improvement and implement an action plan to correct shortcomings. Dweck instructs us not to praise effort, when effort was made half-heartedly.

Dweck is concerned when teachers, coaches, and parents use "effort praise as a consolation prize when kids are *not* learning." She advises,

If a student has tried hard and made little or no progress, we can of course appreciate their effort, but we should never be content with effort that is not yielding further benefits. We need to figure out why that effort is not effective and guide kids toward other strategies and resources that can help them resume learning.

Naturally, Dweck is not for handing out participation trophies. She writes:

There is a strong message in our society about how to boost children's self-esteem, and a main part of that message is: Protect them from failure! While this may help with the immediate problem of a child's disappointment, it can be harmful in the long run.

Dweck gives the real example of a father whose nine-year-old child was devastated after not receiving any ribbons at a gymnastics meet. Should the father say to the child that she deserved to win or was robbed? Perhaps he should say gymnastics is not important or alternatively assure her she

will win next time. This is what the father said to his disappointed daughter:

Elizabeth, I know how you feel. It's so disappointing to have your hopes up and to perform your best but not to win. But you know, you haven't really earned it yet. There were many girls there who've been in gymnastics longer than you and who've worked a lot harder than you. If this is something you really want, then it's something you'll really have to work for.

For any parent who loves their child, what could be better advice? In Dweck's words:

Her father not only told her the truth, but also taught her how to learn from her failures and do what it takes to succeed in the future. He sympathized deeply with her disappointment, but he did not give her a phony boost that would only lead to further disappointment... Withholding constructive criticism does not help children's confidence; it harms their future.

Remember, *constructive* doesn't mean assailing someone's character or making statements assigning permanent characteristics to their abilities or intelligence. Instead, Dweck is clear about the path forward:

Certainly, we want children to appreciate the fruits of hard work. But we also want them to understand the importance of trying new strategies when the one they're using isn't working. (We don't want them to just try harder with the same ineffective strategy.) And we want them to ask for help or input from others when it's needed. This is the process we want them to appreciate: hard work, trying new strategies, and seeking input from others.

Importantly, don't tell kids, "they can do anything." In

Dweck's words:

Few people believe in children's potential as much as I do, or yearn to see all children fulfill their enormous promise. But it doesn't happen by simply telling them, "You can do anything." It happens by helping them gain the skills and find the resources to make progress toward their goals. Otherwise, it's an empty reassurance.

Children learn from our attitudes about "mistakes, obstacles, and setbacks." Do we see mistakes as opportunities for learning or do we act like a miserable victim? If we feel entitled and victimized by life, should we be surprised if our children feel the same way?

The sky is indeed the limit but, again, not in the sense that we can "do anything." Committing to a process and making course corrections as needed means that our potential and our child's potential will be realized as we jointly travel along a path of meeting new challenges.

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