



The Art of Effective Praise

INTRODUCTION

There is a long held belief, both within domestic and educational settings, that praising children boosts self-esteem and automatically leads to greater engagement with learning. More recent research however has revealed that praise per se does not always have the supposed or desired effects and, under certain circumstances, can be detrimental to long term engagement with learning. For Dweck (1999) the crucial ingredients of effective praise are **what** is praised and **how** praise is given.

In recent decades, the predominant approach, both in terms of parenting and education, has been to give children numerous opportunities to succeed, then praise their successes by telling them how 'clever' they are. This assumes that pupils who feel intelligent will automatically be motivated to learn and achieve. However, research suggests that praising ability has **negative** effects on self-esteem, motivation and achievement. Instead of engaging in learning, the child's primary goal becomes proving their intelligence - both to themselves and others - and maintaining that perception.

From their perspective, having to put in effort means they are not as able as they thought and, worse still, failing a task, no matter how insignificant, means they're stupid. Praising ability is also more likely to lead to development of a fixed mindset, where the belief is that intelligence is a fixed, limited commodity. You have what you have and that's it. People with a fixed mindset believe if they are not good at something that's how it is and that effort is pointless. Additionally, tasks that might challenge their perceived intelligence or make them look and feel, unintelligent are routinely avoided. Dweck discovered children as young as four who were praised for personal traits, such as being 'good' or 'clever', had greater difficulty trying different strategies when faced with obstacles and perceived themselves as 'bad' or 'inadequate'. Praising intelligence disempowers, creates a risk-averse environment and fosters a fear of failure.

So what should we be praising our children for? Dweck found the most effective praise was **specific** and directly linked to **effort** and **strategies**. Those praised for **effort** are more likely to risk undertaking a task which will challenge them and that they might not succeed. They are not afraid of making mistakes and are unconcerned with their intelligence and how 'clever' they may, or may not, look to others. Furthermore, praising effort is more likely to foster a growth mindset, where people understand that their abilities can change and grow with effort and perseverance. Research findings suggest that praising effort leads to greater engagement in learning where pupils view challenges and making mistakes as opportunities to learn and develop strategies for success.

"There is a strong message in our society that to boost a child's self esteem we need to protect them from failure. This can help them with the immediate disappointment but do harm in the long term"

Dweck

The same negative effects of praising ability have been found across all ages, from pre-school to university students. In their research with over 400 pupils, Mueller and Dweck (1998) found that those praised for effort created **learning** goals focused on process and strategies. Those praised for ability set **performance** goals focused on end product. In addition, those praised for effort continued to enjoy and persist with challenge, which in turn improved their performance. In contrast enjoyment, persistence and performance decreased in those praised for ability. Additionally, over 40% felt the need to lie about their results when giving an anonymous account of the procedure; only one individual lied in groups praised for effort.

“People who believe that their minds, like their bodies, can get fitter and stronger with exercise, tend to enjoy challenges that stretch them. People who think that their mindsets are fixed, on the other hand, are more likely to see challenges as a threat to their supposed level of ability and shy away from situations where they might look and feel stupid”

(Lucas and Claxton, New Kinds of Smart)

The clear message is that we should continue to praise children’s successes as long as feedback is

specifically focused on strategies, process and effort.

The following suggestions are useful for children of all ages although some will be more suitable for younger children. In any case, the core message is the same whatever the age and stage. The terms children and pupils are interchangeable with young people and students and teachers with parents, early years practitioners and adults.

“Every time teachers give feedback to students, they convey messages that affect students’ opinion of themselves, their motivation and their achievement”

Dweck

Avoid	Instead
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving vague praise, such as ‘well done’, ‘that’s lovely’, ‘good job’, ‘excellent’, without attaching some idea of what you are praising or why. <p>This type of praise is meaningless and tells recipients nothing about how they got to that point or how they can use/transfer strategies/skills for success in the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving bland praise to convey warmth or pleasure at something a pupil has done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give specific feedback, what is it about the piece of work or the way they have approached a task/activity? “You came up with some really interesting ideas, well done” “Those colours go well together, good job” • Be specific about appreciating the effort: “I’m glad you spoke to the class, thanks for the effort”

Avoid

- Linking **praise/criticism** into **personal traits** such as 'clever girl', 'good boy'. Young children, in particular, quickly equate being '**good**' with being '**clever**'. Therefore when faced with a challenge/setback the perception is that they are '**dumb**' so therefore must be '**bad**'.
- Praising **intelligence** to boost self-esteem, motivate or acknowledge success. This sends the message that pupils are primarily valued for their intellect and, instead of progressing in their learning, pupils focus upon **maintaining** their self-esteem in terms of always looking and feeling intelligent. Consequently they stick to tasks that ensure success. Effort is viewed as a **weakness** and challenging tasks, which are deemed a risk to their perceived ability, are **avoided**.
- Displaying only finished work or that which you judge to be worthy of display

Instead

- Give **specific** praise about what they **have done** even when they have managed to carry out a partial instruction or activity/task; the **effort** is important, **look for, acknowledge** and **value** it:

"You put the toys in the box, thank you"

"You sat quietly for [some/most of the] story, well done"
- Concentrate on the **process** (i.e. what the pupil might have done to get to this stage). If they have done well in a test or particular task, acknowledge it and focus, for example, on their study skills, perseverance, concentration and/or effort:

"I like the way you organised your time during that task"

"You did very well in the test, you must have worked really hard in your study time"
- Valuing process also supports the **transfer** of knowledge/strategies to other contexts/situations.
- Be prepared to display work in progress or work that is finished as far as pupils are concerned. This values both effort and process.

Avoid

- Focusing on **task completion** or **end product** as the most important success criteria for giving praise. Pupils who think that they are unlikely to complete a task or believe their work will be judged as 'not up to standard' (either by themselves or an external agent) are unlikely to be motivated enough to even attempt it.
- **Unrealistic expectations** or giving pupils easy tasks in the hope that success will boost their self esteem is counterproductive. The message they receive is that you have **low expectations** of them because you clearly don't think they can cope with anything more difficult. In contrast, deciding a piece of work or task doesn't warrant praise because that is the standard you expect is demoralising. Pupils will not be motivated to work hard in future if they feel their efforts will go unrecognised or expectations are **too high**.

Instead

- Acknowledge the **effort** and **process**. Measure success by the effort involved in the work/task and the strategies/skills employed **regardless** of where pupils are in terms of completion. Celebrate and reward their efforts and successes **thus far**:

"You have been really focused and worked hard so far this morning"
- Research suggests if pupils are praised for effort, process and strategies their performance is **enhanced**. High standards and expectations are fine provided effort and hard work are **acknowledged** and **valued**.

Avoid	Instead
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Giving praise, including for effort, followed by; a “you’ve done well but you could/should have done better/more”. This type of conversation negates any positive feedback and produces a sense that no matter how much effort is expended, it’s never going to be enough. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Substitute but for and. This can be a challenge but is a positive way of providing constructive feedback about what could be improved: “This is a well organised, clear piece of work and needs to be slightly longer” Or Leave out but or and. Praise the effort then give the feedback: “You have worked hard, now you are confident with the method, you just need to go a little faster”

Acknowledgements

Dweck, C. (1999) *Caution – Praise Can Be Dangerous*, available at:

<http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring1999/praisespring99.pdf>

Dweck, C. (2007) *The Perils and Promises of Praise*, available at:

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct07/vol65/num02/The-Peri>

For more information on Growth Mindset, see *Growing Learning Ability*, Educational Psychology Service, Occasional Paper No 11, available at:

<http://www.moray.gov.uk/downloads/file84741.pdf>