



Giving your kids the wrong type of Praise?

For the last 20 years we've been told to praise our kids in order to build their self-esteem. Everyone does it. Just listen to parents at their child's sporting event. As a result of this fad, anything potentially damaging to children's self-esteem was axed. Teachers threw out their red pens and report cards became vague. Criticism was sometimes even replaced with undeserved praise. We've thought the more we praise, the higher our kid's self-esteem will be and therefore the more successful they'll be. Well, now we know this isn't true...

A few years ago psychologist Carol Dweck proved that too much of the wrong type of praise can create kids who underperform and aren't willing to try things they don't think they can succeed at. To study the effects of praise on students, Dweck divided children into two groups to complete puzzles. Some were praised for their intelligence, being told: "You must be smart at this." Other students were praised for their effort: "You must've worked really hard." Both groups were then given the choice of another puzzle with either a difficult or easy option.

The results were shocking – 90 per cent of kids praised for their effort chose the harder puzzle. But those praised for their intelligence chose the easy one. The so-called 'smart' kids took the cop-out!

Why did this happen? When we praise children for their intelligence, it seems we're really telling them to look smart and don't risk making mistakes. Interestingly enough, the study didn't end there. Dweck then did a third puzzle test designed to be difficult. Everyone failed. But again, an amazing difference in attitude between the two groups existed. The 'effort' children, simply assumed they hadn't focused hard enough. They tried really hard and most remarked "this is my favourite test". Not so for the 'smart' kids, who assumed their failure was evidence they weren't really smart at all.

Yet the test wasn't over, there was one final puzzle designed to be as easy as the first. The 'effort' kids improved on their first score by about 30 per cent while the 'smart' kids performed about 20 per cent worse than they did originally. So praising kids for their intelligence rather than effort makes them underperform and believe failure is a result of being dumb. Whereas praising kids for their effort makes them perform to the best of their ability, develop persistence and be more successful.



Where to now? Praise is important but how and what you praise is key. Praise the effort your child makes, saying things like: “I like how you keep trying.” Or: “You worked hard at gymnastics today.” Also, keep your praise specific so your child knows exactly what they did to earn it. At soccer you could praise your son for ‘looking to pass’ rather than ‘playing great’. And be sure to keep your praise sincere. Children over seven know the difference between real and fake praise and are as suspicious of fake praise as adults.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Psychologist and Parent Nicole Pierotti is a baby sleep and parenting expert. After 15 years working with countless parents she can teach you how to have a happy baby. Call 4725 4699 or visit www.babysmiles.com.au for more information.