Praise and intelligence:
Why telling kids they are smart makes them act dumb

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Years ago, Americans were reluctant to praise their kids’ intelligence. Like many people around the world, Americans believed that fawning over children would make them arrogant or narcissistic.

But then something happened. American educators were seduced by the Self Esteem movement. They started promoting the idea that kids need flattery to succeed. Want your child to achieve? Tell him he is bright.

Decades later, the idea is still entrenched in the popular culture. Consider Blue’s Clues, the preschool show that ends each episode with a cheerleading session for kids:

“Hey, you know what? You’re really smart!”

It’s very well-intentioned. But it’s also wrong-headed.

Because it turns out that certain kinds of praise can backfire. In particular, telling kids they are smart can make them act dumb. And here is the evidence.

When you praise kids for their ability, it makes them focus on looking good—not on learning

Kids praised for their intelligence want to keep proving themselves by doing well.

This might sound good, but it’s actually counter-productive.

In a landmark series of experiments on American 5th graders, researchers Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck found that kids behaved very differently depending on the kinds of praise they received.

Kids who were praised for their intelligence tended to avoid challenges. Instead, they preferred easy tasks. They were also more interested in their competitive standing—how they measured up relative to others—than they were in learning how to improve their future performance.

By contrast, kids who were praised for their effort showed the opposite trend. They preferred tasks that were challenging—tasks they would learn from.

And kids praised for effort were more interested in learning new strategies for success than they were in finding out how other children had performed.
Kids differed in other respects, too. Compared to kids praised for their effort, kids who were accustomed to being praised for their ability were

- More likely to give up after a failure
- More likely to perform poorly after a failure
- More likely to misrepresent how well they did on a task

And that’s not all. Kids praised for their intelligence were more likely to view their failures as evidence of low intelligence.

**When you praise kids for their intelligence, they learn to view their failures as evidence of stupidity**

In the experiments by Mueller and Dweck, kids were given moderately difficult problems to solve. When each kid was finished, he was told “Wow, you did really well on these problems. You got… a really high score” (Mueller and Dweck 2002).

In addition, each kid received one of three treatments. He was either

- praised for his intelligence (“You must be smart at these problems”)
- praised for his effort (“You must have worked hard at these problems”),

or

- given no additional feedback (the control condition)

Next, kids were given a second set of problems—this time, very difficult ones—and kids were asked to explain why they performed poorly.

The kids who had been praised for their intelligence on previous tasks attributed more of their failure to a lack of intelligence.

But kids praised for their effort responded the same way as controls did—attributing their failure to a lack of effort (Meuller and Dweck 2002).

In other words, telling kids they are smart can make kids LESS likely to view themselves as intelligent.

By praising kids for being smart, we teach them that their performance is a definitive test of intelligence. Kids might enjoy the initial praise, but when they encounter difficult challenges later—as they must—the praise backfires.

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**Praise and preschoolers**

**Are young children harmed by the wrong kind of praise?**

Some research suggests that praising intelligence can enhance the motivation of preschoolers (Henderlong 2000).
However, praising intelligence is NOT as effective as praising a child’s effort and choice of strategies (Henderlong 2000).

In one study, preschoolers were presented with two puzzles to solve and then given one of three types of feedback:

- “Person” praise that emphasized intelligence (“You are a really good problem-solver!”)
- “Process” praise that emphasized strategies (“You’re finding really good ways to do this!”)
- Neutral feedback (“You finished both puzzles.”)

Next, kids were given a much tougher puzzle and they experienced failure.

When the preschoolers were offered a similar puzzle weeks later, those kids who had been praised showed more motivation than kids who had received only neutral feedback.

But the kids who had received “process” praise showed more motivation than the kids who had gotten “person praise” (Henderlong 2000).

Another experiment yielded similar results (Cimpian et al 2007). In this study, preschoolers watched a puppet show in which the protagonist drew a picture and was praised by a teacher.

Some preschoolers saw the protagonist receive generic praise about his ability (“You are a good drawer”).

Other preschoolers saw the protagonist receive praise only for that specific drawing (“You did a good job drawing”).

Then the protagonist made a mistake that the teacher commented on. How did the kids feel about the show?

The kids who’d watched the protagonist receive generic praise (“You are a good drawer”) were more upset about the subsequent mistakes. When asked if they would like to draw themselves, these kids answered no.

By contrast, the kids who had been exposed to the specific praise (“You did a good job drawing”) were more likely to show an interest in drawing.

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**The right way to praise**

**So what’s the bottom line?**

Certainly, it appears that telling kids they are smart can be counterproductive.

But this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t praise our kids. As mentioned above, even the “wrong” kind of praise can be more motivating than no praise at all.

What’s important is to avoid praise that makes kids stop challenging themselves. The problem with telling kids that they are smart or talented is that kids become frightened of failure. They’ve been labeled and they don’t want to do anything to lose that label.
Moreover, kids raised for intelligence tend to believe that intelligence is something innate and unchangeable (Mueller and Dweck 1998). As a result, these kids are rendered helpless by failure. If you fail, you must not be smart. End of story.

If we keep these principles in mind, it becomes clear what kids of praise are the most helpful. Instead of telling your child she is smart or talented, try these alternatives.

- Praise your child for her strategies (e.g., “You found a really good way to do it”)
- Praise your child for specific work (e.g., “You did a great job with those math problems”)
- Praise your child for his persistence or effort (e.g., “I can see you’ve been practicing” and “Your hard work has really paid off”)

Praising kids for effort (and not innate ability) may help them develop a better mindset for learning. For more information, see my article "Harmful beliefs: How a theory of intelligence can hamper your child’s ability to learn."

And keep in mind other important guidelines for effective praise.

There are other pitfalls to avoid. For instance, even praise for effort can backfire under certain conditions. For more information, see this article on the most effective ways to praise kids.

And what about the flip side of praise -- criticism?

Criticism can be just as tricky as praise to get right. Perhaps it's even trickier, because criticism is intrinsically negative.

But some intriguing experiments suggest a solution to the problem -- one that is surprisingly simple. Check out my article "Correcting behavior: The magic words that help kids cope with mistakes."