

Kids and Praise

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Just when you think that you're getting the basics of this parenting thing down pat, the experts go and do it again—they come up with new research that touches your life and either confirms or confuses your parenting tactics. If the new findings validate the way that you've been raising your kids, then it's obvious that you're a genius, but if your manner of handling the children flies in the face of the results, then what or who do you believe? Do you trust your gut instinct or put faith in the new-fangled research?

Well, luckily the results of the latest studies on how to praise your kids, or whether to even praise them at all, do make a lot of common sense. So, even if your praising style is a bit off, you're most likely still in the ballpark! Most of us, myself included, have evolved as parents believing that giving praise is like eating calorie-free chocolate—the more the better. But new research suggests that complimenting children in certain ways may set them up to become *praise junkies*—looking to their parents or others for validation of almost every act or feeling, rather than developing an internal barometer for self-esteem and feelings of accomplishment and achievement.

Actually, the study findings are quite simple and to the point: Kids need praise to guide the development of such characteristics as self-control, self-discipline, frustration tolerance, and perseverance. But, psychologist Carol Dweck in a pair of studies recently completed through the Department of Psychology at Columbia University, notes that the manner in which children are praised as well as what they are praised for, makes a significant difference in how they later fare when faced with challenges or perceived failures.

Dweck and her associate Dr. Claudia Mueller note that “Children who are praised for their intelligence learn to value performance, while children praised for their effort and hard work value learning opportunities.” The first scenario, as in praising a child for a personal characteristic such as intelligence (“Aren't you smart--I can count on you for getting an A on your reports!”) can often backfire. The researchers note that kids given praise that “evaluates themselves or their traits and abilities (known as person praise) were significantly more likely than children who received effort or strategy praise (“Wow, I like the way you looked at this problem from several angles and chose an unusual solution.”) to display the full complement of helpless reactions (cognitions, affect, and behavior) when they later met with setbacks”.

What that means, folks, is that kids who are praised for “themselves” (traits such as physical attractiveness, intelligence or possessions) are prone to deal less well in the future with problems and challenges than are children who are complimented for their *work effort*, regardless of success. In a nutshell, complimenting work effort often leads to a solid *work ethic* that your children will continue to display as they grow to and through adulthood. The time-worn sayings “it's not whether you win or lose that's important, it's how you play the game” or “it's not the gift that counts, it's the thought

that really matters” apparently are not just Grandma’s ramblings—there’s now clinical data to back her up!

Dr. Dweck puts it beautifully by suggesting that parents “express appreciation of what a child has accomplished by focusing on the effort put in or the method used to accomplish a task”, rather than by labeling or evaluating the child as a whole. She notes that “praise for the effort, the strategizing, the work, and the persistence children put in to their accomplishments may allow for fuller recognition of their achievements and at the same time is not accompanied by the pitfalls that were found for ability praise.” In plain language, this means that kids should be praised for *how* they do their work rather than for the final product or their IQ score.

So, if your five-year-old son just can’t seem to keep his crayon between the lines but he’s trying his best, or your sixteen-year-old daughter is giving it her all but still scares the dickens out of you when you take her out driving those first few times, remember that it’s the effort that counts, not necessarily the final product. In fact, there’s a body of research that suggests that when things come *too easily* it’s human nature to be unappreciative, to take our abilities for granted, and to not be able to rise to the occasion when we are unexpectedly challenged by adversity.

Here’s the scoop—in order to avoid raising a *praise junky*, try to:

- Praise the “process”, rather than the person. Do say “Stacking blocks is tough for a little guy like you, let’s keep trying” rather than “You’re so smart—stacking blocks will be a piece of cake!”
- Be specific in your praise so that your kids will understand exactly what behaviors you are complimenting: “That was a tough math problem and I saw that you were becoming frustrated. But you stuck with it!” rather than “Good job on your math homework.”
- Praise often, but don’t overdo it. Too much praise tends to water down the effectiveness and purpose of complimenting. (I can’t tell you how many children and teenagers have noted to me that they are skeptical of their parents’ praise because “It’s just my Mom saying I’m pretty—she has to because she’s my mother.”) If you want your kids to trust and to believe in you, then you have to *be believable*.
- Love unconditionally, but praise conditionally. No matter what your kids do, I’m sure that they are well loved. However, they don’t need to be enveloped with compliments 24/7—it’s too much for them to absorb and to believe, as well as too draining for you! You can be an effective parent if you praise only when it’s deserved—your children will develop their self-concept largely from how the real world treats them. And, in my experience, most of us are complimented for our work ethic, not just for being who we are or what we own.
- Take advantage of opportunities to compliment your kids. As little ones, there are so many “firsts” (sitting up, crawling, walking, and talking) that it’s a literal praise-a-thon. However, as they mature, many kids tend to communicate as much as or even more with their friends, and you may not even be aware of some of their efforts or accomplishments. Therefore, a good place to start with the middle-and high-schoolers

is to discuss projects and schoolwork. Also, athletic activities can be fertile ground for effort praise, even if the kid doesn't lead the league in homers or field goals. As long as he's out there giving it his all—that's what is deserving of your compliments and reinforcement.

What really matters is that you strike a balance between trusting your gut parenting instincts and taking into account what the researchers find. If it makes common sense—then it probably is the right thing for your kids and your family!