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Preschoolers and Praise: What Kinds of Messages Help Kids Grow?

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By Deborah Farmer Kris

A three-year-old dressed in a superhero cape collapses in a corner and yells, “I can’t put on my shoes! I can’t!” A four-year-old proudly sets the table “all by myself,” only to fall apart when a glass of water tips over.

Preschool children are in the early stages of developing their [self concept](#) — their mental picture of who they are, what they can do, and who they are capable of becoming. During this pivotal time, the language parents and educators use with preschoolers — particularly when they face challenges or struggle to learn new skills — can help them shape a healthy mental model of how people learn and grow.

As children get older, many come to view intelligence as a [fixed trait](#) that cannot be altered. Contrast this with what’s known as a “[growth mindset](#),” which views intelligence as malleable and responsive to effort. Most parents “are crushed when they see kids give up and say things like, ‘I’m just not good at this. I can’t do it,’” says Dr. Carissa Romero, director of programs at Stanford University’s Project for Education Research That Scales (PERTS). “Conversely, we’re amazed by kids who are willing to struggle until they get it.”

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These parents are responding to a real concern. Research shows that students who adopt a growth mindset [thrive on challenges](#), show resilience in the face of obstacles, and view failure as part of the learning process. According to Romero, “Mindsets sit at top of a cascade of [non-cognitive factors](#) predicting student success.”

The good news is that mindsets are malleable — and preschool years offer a rich developmental window for parents and caregivers interested in nurturing a growth mindset in children.

Replace Generic Praise with Process Praise

Generic praise is easy to give — Great job! Wow! Nice! — but these statements lack instructional value. In contrast, descriptive statements — also called “process praise” or “non-generic praise” — share specific observations about children’s choices and efforts. They are *teaching statements* because they provide information children can use in the future. The trick, says Romero, is to help kids tie their success to the strategies and steps they are taking.

According [one study](#), the type of language parents used with their one-to-three year olds was predictive of their motivational framework five years later. The most effective praise emphasized one of three things: a child’s effort, a child’s strategies, or a child’s actions.

Romero, one of the paper’s authors, said, “This was a really exciting study for parents. Their own language when they are talking to their kids makes a profound difference, despite the different messages they get from everyone else once they enter school. Positive messages from caregiver, alone, can be predictive.”

Romero urges parents to focus on what they notice. For very young children, it can start simple. Try replacing “Good job” with “Good job sharing with your sister”; or replacing “Nice picture” with “I like how you use blue and yellow in this picture.”

“Process praise ties children’s actions to their success,” says Romero. “If you help students understand that their actions lead to success, when they face a setback, they’ll realize their actions can help them overcome that setback.”

Harness the Power of “Yet”

As preschoolers become more [independent](#), they often toggle between the frustration of “I can’t do it!” and the excitement of “I did it myself!” When parents hear, “I can’t!” they can help the child reflect on the greater possibilities with language like this: “You can’t do it *yet*. You are still learning. But keep trying.” In other words, adding the word “yet” reframes the sentence away from present frustration and toward future possibility.

Research on the power of yet — while still in progress — holds promise, says Romero. In a recent TED talk, Dr. [Carol Dweck](#), the Stanford professor who pioneered research in growth mindset, described how emphasizing the word “yet” helps children see themselves on a learning curve: “Just the words ‘yet’ or ‘not yet,’ we’re finding, give kids greater confidence, give them a path into the future that creates greater persistence.”

Last fall, Sesame Street picked on this theme, teaming with Janelle Monae to produce the song [“The Power of Yet.”](#)

Tell Stories of Resilience

Storytelling is a powerful vehicle for shaping children’s understanding of how the world works. According to one [study](#), children who hear stories about how family members and ancestors overcame obstacles are more resilient in the face of challenges. The

study's authors note that the most helpful narratives are oscillating, reflecting life's ups and downs, and ultimately reminding children that "they belong to something bigger than themselves."

In a similar vein, parents and educators can remind children of their own stories of perseverance — specific moments when the child worked hard to learn something new or overcome an obstacle. These might range from learning how to ride a bike to sticking with a difficult puzzle to adjusting to a new sibling.

The language we use helps shape young children's understanding of themselves and their abilities. As Romero notes, "I think all parents want their kids to grow up to be resilient adults who persevere in the face of challenges and don't let their failures define them. A growth mindset orients people towards learning over performance. It helps children develop into lifelong learners who take on challenges and learn from them rather than crumble in the face of them. This ultimately leads to more success in school and in life."

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