

A Troubling Side Effect of Praise

Young students who are praised for being smart are more likely to cheat, a new study finds.

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Teachers often use praise to reward good behavior or correct answers. But there's a potential downside to this common choice: Praising young children for being smart can increase the likelihood that they'll cheat, according to [a new study](#) in *Psychological Science* by an international team of researchers.

In the study, 300 children in China—half of whom were 3 years old, and the other half 5—played a six-round game with cards, guessing whether a card drawn by one of the researchers was high or low. The children were told they'd win a prize if they guessed correctly at least three times—and the game was rigged so that they'd be correct for two out of the first five rounds.

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After each round that the child guessed correctly, one-third of them were praised for their ability, being told, "You are so smart" by the researcher. Another third were praised for their effort or performance: "You did very well this time." The final third—the baseline group—received no praise.

After the fifth round, the researcher left the room for one minute after asking the child not to peek at the last card. A hidden camera observed whether the child cheated or not. Sixty percent of the children who were praised for ability cheated. Among children who were praised for effort, 41 percent peeked, and 40 percent of the baseline children did. Although 40 percent may seem like a high baseline, [research](#) suggests that young children lack the self-control and planning skills necessary to resist the temptation to peek.

Why would praising ability rather than effort encourage children to cheat? The researchers, led by Li Zhao, a professor at Hangzhou Normal University in China, believe that when they're praised for their ability, children feel pressured to meet people's expectations. Unlike performance praise, ability praise "implies the presence of a stable ability (e.g., smartness) that underlies performance," they write—and children may be willing to cheat to preserve the perception of their ability.

This research builds on previous studies exploring the effects of praise on children. In 1998, Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck found that after receiving [praise for being smart](#), fifth-grade students exaggerated how well they had performed. They were also less persistent in finishing problems, enjoyed working on problems less, and performed worse than students who were praised for effort.

More recently, Dweck coined the terms *growth mindset* and *fixed mindset* to describe how students' beliefs about learning influence their motivation and capacity to succeed. Students with [a growth mindset](#) believe that qualities such as intelligence or talent can be developed through dedication and hard work. They see mistakes as part of the learning process, are more resilient, and are willing to put in tremendous amounts of effort to solve challenging problems.

Students with a fixed mindset, on the other hand, believe that intelligence and ability are fixed traits, and that challenging problems are often out of their reach. They seek to avoid making mistakes, afraid that failure will make them appear less intelligent. They also believe that talent—more so than effort—leads to success.

In their [research](#), Dweck and her colleagues found that praise, whether for ability or effort, could influence a student's attitude toward learning. Students who were praised for effort—"You're trying hard"—were more likely to choose challenging tasks that could help them learn, while students who were praised for ability—"You're really smart"—were more likely to choose tasks in their comfort zone that they could easily complete.

The takeaway: Although praise is a convenient way to reward students, carefully consider the consequences of telling them they're smart. Focus on helping them develop a growth mindset by addressing their performance instead of their ability.