

BUILDING CONFIDENCE: HONEY, YOU'RE NOT THAT SPECIAL

You are brilliant. A great hockey player. So smart. A great colourer. So talented! A good artist.

Want to boost your children's self-esteem? Tell them how ordinary they are. A growing body of research suggests that praising kids for their talent and intelligence doesn't help them achieve success - it sets them up for disappointment

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You're so smart. You're the best hockey player on your team. Your colouring is genius.

All are self-esteem boosters that parents lavish on their children to make them feel good about themselves and prepare them for success.

And all are wrong.

A growing body of research is finding that praise based on talent and intelligence - as opposed to effort - not only doesn't help kids achieve success, it actually backfires.

Children who are praised as smart, special and talented stumble at school when faced with challenges that don't immediately reinforce the mantras they hear at home. They're also more likely to avoid tasks at which they may fail than children who are praised instead for their hard work. And they are more apt to lie and cheat well into their university years. Psychologist Polly Young-Eisendrath calls it the self-esteem trap.

"It's the expectation of being exceptional and the pressure on oneself to be exceptional which creates a kind of restlessness and sense of self-consciousness," says Dr. Young-Eisendrath, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of Vermont.

What's more, according to her new book, *The Self-Esteem Trap: Raising Confident and Compassionate Kids in an Age of Self-Importance*, overpraised children don't outgrow these setbacks.

So, she and others propose a brave new model for praise that closes the door on the self-esteem movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Job one: Focus on a child's effort and on how they tackle tasks. Above all, let your kids know just how ordinary they are.

"There's a kind of wisdom in ordinariness that we seem to have forgotten," Dr. Young-Eisendrath says. "It's uplifting to know everyone struggles."

Otherwise, children may end up with many of the same problems Dr. Young-Eisendrath now sees regularly in the young adults whom she treats in her practice. She noticed that many of their woes stem back to being told how special they were by their boomer parents throughout their childhoods.

"To me it's the most ironic kind of blind spot that we've ever had as parents," she says, including herself in the overpraising demographic. "A whole generation of parents did something all at once. We shifted the viewpoint of parenting from raising a citizen and a member of a family to being overly focused on the self."

Carol Dweck, a psychology professor and researcher at Stanford University, says she sees the burgeoning area of academic research in which she's been working for 10 years finally breaking through to a civilian audience.

"Praising intelligence and talent feels so intuitive to people," she says. "But the minute parents think about it, they realize it hasn't worked."

Her provocative study last year of 400 New York fifth graders compared two groups of children who wrote an IQ test involving relatively easy puzzles.

One group of children was praised as intelligent and the other for making a good effort. In subsequent testing, the "smart" kids backed away from a potentially difficult assignment when an easier one was offered.

They took their failure at another very difficult test as a sign they weren't smart at all. And in a final test, which was exactly the same as the first one, the children who were tagged as intelligent did about 20 per cent worse than they had at the outset. The kids praised for their effort improved their score by 30 per cent.

"Telling a child they're special and different from other children - the implication is 'better than' - makes them feel they deserve things that they haven't necessarily earned," Dr. Dweck says. "They can be really bitter when these things don't come their way."

By labelling a child smart or talented, Dr. Dweck says, you are in effect outsourcing their self-esteem. The more children are praised, the more they may be looking over their shoulder: "Am I going to get praise? Do people think this is good?"

"It removes it from their own enjoyment and self-evaluation to someone else's," she says.

Her advice, based on her research, is to foster in children a "growth mindset" that they can develop their abilities through effort. Resilient kids don't think they're bad when they fail at something, she says.

"My message is not 'don't praise,' " she says, "but 'praise in a way that's helpful to the child.' "

Some parents are already making a conscious effort to buck the self-esteem juggernaut. Christine Hall of Burlington, Ont., says she tries to offer comments such as "I'm so happy for you" when one of her sons, say, does well at a sporting event.

"I'm happy for him that he achieved the result he was aiming for, not proud of his result. I don't want him to ever think he has let me down if he doesn't achieve a specific result."

That also leaves room if one of her kids does achieve a spectacular result, such as a high finish in a race or a handful of goals in a game.

"Then I do praise their result, along with their effort. It would be strange to them if I didn't."

In addition to praising effort instead of intelligence, Dr. Dweck has found, there are positive benefits to praising a child's strategy and process.

In another study she conducted, she found that even telling a child she is a good drawer makes a child vulnerable later on when she makes a mistake. "They're harder on themselves."

While Dr. Young-Eisendrath says she doesn't want to blame parents - "They're doing what they thought they were supposed to do" - she does see a number of easy ways to avoid the self-esteem trap.

She bemoans the elevation of everyday childhood milestones to major causes of elation, including the trend toward potty-training parties in her home state of Vermont.

"Potty training in my day was more of a requirement. You didn't celebrate with a cake in the shape of a toilet."

By age 11, she says, children should be dealing with managing their grades on their own. Teenagers should do their own college and university applications.

Dr. Young-Eisendrath argues that by stepping out of the way and letting children tackle problems on their own, they will build true self-esteem.

"It's recasting the framework of how you work with self-confidence. Life always involves difficulty and there's a process for accomplishing anything. You have to have patience.

Praise, then and now

OLD

You're brilliant.

You're a great hockey player.

You're smart.

You're so talented.

You're a great colourer.

You're a good artist.

NEW

I really like the way you tried all different ways and found one that worked.

I'm really happy for you - you worked really hard on the ice today.

I like the way you took on a hard task. I like the way you stuck to it.

You're stretching yourself. You're trying new things.

I like the way you used colours.

That drawing makes me happy. Tell me about it.

Tralee Pearce