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Nice try! Why parents should stop telling loving lies

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On an Ottawa soccer field in late June, Lothar Wulf was watching his son's competitive team lose badly. With few exceptions, they weren't exactly hustling. On the sidelines, the parents tried to be encouraging. "Good try," a few shouted when yet another scoring opportunity passed by. Finally, Mr. Wulf threw up his hands: Enough with the "nice tries," he said. Why can't parents be more honest with their kids? Better to be realistic and tell them: "Try harder."

How many parents, though, are willing to do that? From the soccer field to the homework table, many parents, seeking to build self-esteem, are piling on the praise. With all the worry about rising anxiety and stress in kids, it's easy to see why so many resort to the loving "good try" lie.

But are all these compliments constructive? And do they really make kids happy?

Topping out the parenting praise meter may not be the best move, according to parenting experts. After all, it's the coddling parents who create "teacups," the term coined by California university officials for the kids who arrive on campus with their parents lugging the suitcases, then crack when they learn firsthand about the bell curve.

Pushy parents fare no better, creating "crispies," who are so fried by the pressure to win that scholarship that they snap and crumble in the real world, where no one cares about their science grade. The trick is to find the right balance of kudos-giving, or you can kiss your daughter's future in cardiology goodbye.

Parents probably wouldn't be so obsessed with praising their kids if they weren't so terrified their children might actually be – dare we say it? – average, says psychologist Wendy Mogel. Much of our praise is really about our own expectations and wish fulfilment, suggests Dr. Mogel, author of *The Blessings of a B-minus,* and *The Blessing of A Skinned Knee.* Every child is gifted, or soon to emerge as gifted, or hampered by a learning disability that hides their giftedness from the teacher, who just doesn't understand them, she notes. So every crayon mark is simply "extra-ordinary, honey!" (Otherwise, tragically, it would just be ordinary.)

Dr. Mogel calls it "ta-da! parenting," and, to make us feel better, explains that "it's the most devoted, loving, intelligent parents who do it." They're hoping their kids will be happy all the time – and happy with them, she says. She gives advice to schools and counsels families, so she sees the results: plays where everyone must have the same number of lines, school-wide bans on traumatizing red pens for test marking.

Her grandfather, who went to school in New York, used to tell a story about a music teacher who would give the class a singing test at the beginning of the year, and make three groups: altos, sopranos and listeners. You can just hear the parent-teacher meetings today: Who you callin' a listener?

To help parents regain a healthier perspective, she often asks them this question: “Do your kids flush the toilet?” (The usual answer is not yes.) “We are so busy worshipping at the altar of their achievements that we are letting them off the hook on everything else.”

Is failing really so scary? Being less-than-amazing at an activity can teach resilience and perseverance, a more accurate assessment of what’s needed to be better, and help shape interests and identify talents.

The kids aren’t fooled anyway, points out Elona Hartjes, a teacher in Mississauga, who, after 30 years in the classroom, has seen her fair share of teacups and crispies. They know when praise is platitude, she says, and when their success is undermined by a rescue from mom. False praise can also be interpreted as “this is the best my parents think I can do.”

“Our society is so much ‘good try, good try, good try,’ ” Ms. Hartjes says. “But I don’t think kids are always trying, because they have learned they don’t have to.”

For one thing, some students count on their parents to bail them out, says one Ottawa high-school teacher. “You know that if you give them a bad mark – but a fair mark – mom or dad will be phoning the school.” Or, the teacher says, “I see kids that can’t take any constructive criticism, they just fall apart. They’re so fragile.”

It’s better to learn how to handle stumbling blocks and independence in Grade 9, she argues. “You don’t want to be the 30-year-old guy whose mom is coming in to defend you after you’ve had a bad performance review.”

Rather than create “successful failures” for kids, Alfie Kohn, the author of *Conditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason*, would change school completely – eliminate grades and homework, and remove the competition from children’s lives so they can focus on skills such as collaboration.

In the academic world today, he says, praise – even the cheerleading kind – is often about control, masked in affirmation: “a verbal doggy biscuit.” Hidden in that “good try” is an evaluation, an expectation to do better next time.

Overpraise, he argues, sends a message to kids that they need to achieve to earn their parents’ pride. “The only thing that counts is the message they receive, not the message we intended to send.” It’s better, he says, to hold back praise and ask questions (How do you feel about this mark? Why did you take this approach?) so that your child learns how to assess his own efforts.

Kids already know the benefits of messing up – they do it every time they plug in the Wii.

“When kids do poorly in a video game, they fail a lot, but they don’t worry about it – they shrug it off, and it’s a learning experience,” points out Dan Willingham, a psychologist at the University of Virginia. Yet that same positive persistence often doesn’t translate to school.

Children, he says, need to see their struggles with times tables as a learning moment rather than a statement about who they are – something parents and teachers can foster by focusing on effort and solutions as opposed to achievement.

Shallow praise has been a disaster to self-esteem – and success – says Barry Schwartz, a psychology professor at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Kids sheltered from failure or disappointment don’t learn independence.

“It’s a delicate balance, between being honest and discouraging, and dishonest and unrealistically encouraging,” he says. “There’s no recipe to follow.” Parents want kids to have high expectations, he says, but what’s the point if they aren’t strong enough to get up again when they don’t meet them?

Perseverance has been shown to be a better predictor of success than test scores and IQ, Prof. Schwartz says. In the end, there’s something essential to be learned from a C on a report card or a loss on the soccer pitch: Life goes on.

Praise that works

Avoid phrases such as “You’re good at math,” or “You’re a smart boy.” Carol Dweck, a psychologist who studies mindset and motivation at Stanford University, says this can teach kids to equate having to try in school with failure, or make them too focused on test scores instead of learning.

Be specific. Comment on something in the way they handled the puck in one period of the game, rather than the generic “good job.”

Recognize effort, which is a life skill – not an achievement, such as grades, which depend on someone else’s assessment.

Keep gushing to a minimum. Overpraise can send the wrong message, especially if children know they didn’t do their best. It says, “This is all my mom thinks I am able to do.”

Don’t make praise about control, as in: “You practised piano very well today; maybe you should try 15 more minutes next time.”

Let them do the talking. Ask questions to try to make your child assess her own efforts. For example: What did you learn on this social studies test? Why did you choose these colours in this drawing? What did you like about your hockey game today?