

Four common mistakes parents make when praising their kids

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Everybody wants what's best for their kids. We know we should be helping to build their self-esteem and boost their resilience. Problem is, our efforts might be doing more harm than good.

Multiple studies have shown that certain types of praise can actually harm children, whether it makes them shrink from challenges or suffer a loss of motivation to try new things. The latest research even shows that what seems like a natural tendency to heap praise on certain kids will backfire.

Here are some of the common pitfalls for parents, and why researchers say to avoid them.



“You’re so smart!”

Why we do it: Because we want children to feel good about their abilities.

Why we shouldn’t: Doing so can make kids think their abilities are fixed, so why bother trying harder? A study published last year looked at how so-called person praise (“You’re very smart”) and process praise (“You worked hard on that”) affected children. Researchers from the University of Chicago and Stanford University found that toddlers who received process praise were, at ages seven and eight, not only more likely to believe they could improve themselves through hard work, but also better at solving problems and more willing to tackle difficult tasks.



“You’re incredibly good at this!”

Why we do it: Parents have a natural tendency to heap inflated praise on kids with low self-esteem in the hopes that it will help to develop self-confidence.

Why we shouldn’t: In a study to be published in the journal Psychological Science, researchers at Ohio State University found that this strategy can backfire. Children aged seven to 12 with low self-esteem who received inflated praise – “That drawing is perfect!” “You did super good!” – were more likely to avoid new challenges. Inflated praise sets high standards and kids with low self-esteem may steer clear of difficult tasks out of fear of falling short, the researchers said.



“You were the best player on the field today!”

Why we do it: It can seem natural to compare children with other kids.

Why we shouldn’t: In a 2006 study of children in the fourth and fifth grades, researchers at Oregon’s Reed College found that kids who receive “social comparison praise” lose motivation without it, while those who received “mastery praise” (“You’ve really learned how to solve these puzzles”) reported enhanced intrinsic motivation to take on challenges. Social comparison praise can see kids chasing the reward of knowing their competitive standing, rather than the reward of a job well done, regardless of how others did.



“You’re so good!”

Why we do it: Because offering insincere praise seems better than no praise at all.

Why we shouldn’t: Researchers have found that kids who receive insincere praise may feel that their parents don’t understand them – the child version, basically, of: “You don’t even know who I am.” As well, insincere praise can damage a child’s motivation, especially when the praise is overly general and highly effusive, a 2002 study found. Kids know when they’re being patronized and insincere praise can make them distrust you. Keep praise specific and credible, researchers say.