

Negative Aspects of Labeling Children with Talents & Intelligence

by Claudia M. Mueller, Ph.D. & Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D.

While children are often commended for good grades and high test scores, new research illustrates that complimenting children for their intelligence and academic performance may lead them to believe that good test scores and high grades are more important than learning and mastering something new. While lauding a child's scholastic aptitude is intended to boost their academic performance, it leaves them ill-prepared for coping with setbacks.

Psychologists Claudia M. Mueller, Ph.D. & Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., of Columbia University conducted six studies of 412 fifth-graders in which they compared the goals and achievement behaviors of children praised for intelligence with those praised for effort/hard work under conditions of failure as well as success. Through their studies, the psychologists demonstrated that commending children for their intelligence after good performance might backfire by making them highly performance-oriented and thus extremely vulnerable to the effects of subsequent setbacks.

On the other hand, children who are commended for their effort concentrate on learning goals and strategies for achievement. The researchers also observed that children who were commended for their ability when they were successful learned to believe that intelligence is a fixed trait that cannot be developed or improved.

The children who were explicitly commended after their successes were the ones who blamed poor performances on their own lack of intelligence. However, when children praised for their hard work performed poorly, they blamed their lack of success on poor effort and demonstrated a clear determination to learn strategies that would enhance subsequent performances.

Dr. Dweck, lead author of the study, claims that some of our basic beliefs about how to increase children's self-esteem and achievement are misguided. "Praising children's intelligence, far from boosting their self-esteem, encourages them to embrace self-defeating behaviors, such as worrying about failure and avoiding risks," she notes. "However, when children are taught the value of concentrating, strategizing, and working hard when dealing with academic challenges, this encourages them to sustain their motivation, performance, and self-esteem."

The studies demonstrated that children who are praised for their intelligence learn to value performance, while children praised for their effort and hard work value learning opportunities. Virtually all of the findings were similar not only for boys and girls but also among children from several different ethnic groups in rural and urban communities. In addition, the differing effects resulting from praise for

effort and praise for ability were unrelated to children's ability, for children with low test scores were equally likely to stress performance goals at the expense of mastery goals as children with high scores.

The researchers believe that their findings may demonstrate why bright young girls who do well in grade school often perform poorly in upper grades. They note that in their desire to bolster young girls' confidence in their abilities, educators have praised them for their intelligence which, these studies have shown, could have an undesired impact on their subsequent motivation and performance.

Labeling children as gifted or talented may also have a negative impact on them. Such labeling may be the cause of children becoming overly concerned with justifying that label and less concerned with meeting challenges that enhance their learning and mastery skills. They may begin to believe that academic setbacks indicate that they do not deserve to be labeled as gifted. The authors advise that gifted and talented programs should emphasize meeting challenges, applying effort, and searching for new learning strategies.

The authors suggest that when students succeed, attention and approval should be directed at their effort and hard work. Children should be praised for how they do their work rather than for the final product or their ability, the researchers say. According to the researchers, future studies should more closely examine praise for effort and its effects on motivation and should attempt to determine whether such praise is always beneficial to children. Researchers should attempt to measure the role of trait-oriented feedback (such as praising a child for their intelligence) in establishing the belief that one's worth or basic competence is dependent on performing well.

Reference:

"Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance" by Claudia M. Mueller, Ph.D. & Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D. in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 75, No. 1.

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