

SMOTHERED IN PRAISE

Are we hurting our children by constantly telling them how smart and great they are?

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For The Register-Guard

Appeared in print: Sunday, Oct. 3, 2010, page G1

<http://special.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/opinion/25315084-47/smart-failure-intelligence-kids-praise.csp>

“She’s so advanced!” beams the proud parent. “He’s just so smart!” boasts the doting grandmother.

So goes another day in the Lake Wobegon land of a pediatric office, where all the children are above average.

Not to disparage anyone, for who would contest the prerogative of kin to exult their beloved child? Would that all children be so adored.

Yet what happens when a child, since before she could talk, constantly hears that she’s smart? Does self-awareness of one’s smartness translate into fearless confidence later on? Or does it instill fearful hesitation to try new things, fearing failure?

Kids today are being raised in an age where self-confidence is everything. A positive attitude, not perseverance, is the answer to the riddle of success. At home and school, children are saturated with messages that they’re doing great — that they are great, innately so. They have what it takes.

Having been lauded from cradle to college for their greatness, too many leave the nest — if they leave at all — without the faintest idea of what greatness is, or what it demands. Greatness is always there and always theirs, and failure is always someone else’s fault.

According to a survey conducted by Columbia University, 85 percent of parents believe in the importance of telling their kids early and often that they’re smart. The presumption is that if a child believes he’s smart — having been told so, repeatedly — he won’t be intimidated by new challenges.

Constant praise is an angel on the shoulder, daily whispering the words of Al Franken's Stuart Smalley: "You're good enough, you're smart enough, and doggone it, people like you!"

But a growing body of research strongly suggests that it works the other way around. Giving kids the tag of "smart" does not insulate them from underperforming. It actually might undermine their prospects of success.

Researchers long have noticed that large numbers of the smartest children severely underestimate their own aptitude. They lack confidence in their ability to tackle novel tasks. Smart children, to whom many things come very quickly, often give up just as quickly when things don't.

Children afflicted with this lack of perceived competence adopt lower standards for success and expect less of themselves. They too readily divide the world into things they are naturally good at and things they are not. They pay rapt attention to the devil on the other shoulder, who shouts, "You're not good at this!" Unless otherwise nudged or shoved into a new activity, too often they heed an internal warning to refrain.

Always having been praised for their intelligence, smart children often overlook or discount the importance of effort. My smarts are the key to my success, the kid's reasoning goes, therefore I don't need to put out effort. Expending effort is public proof that you can't cut it on the strength of your natural gifts.

Researchers have measured the effect of praising schoolchildren for their intelligence ("you're so smart at this"), as compared to the effect of praising them for their effort ("you must have worked really hard at this"). What is consistently found is that children praised for their effort subsequently choose harder tasks, while those praised for their intelligence choose easier ones.

Over and again, the "smart" kids took the easy way out.

The adverse effect of praise for innate intelligence on performance holds true for students of every socioeconomic class. And it knocks down both boys and girls — the very brightest girls, especially, are found most likely to collapse after failure.

Children praised solely and repeatedly for their intelligence are in effect being told the name of the game is to look smart, to not risk making mistakes and being embarrassed. Failure is assumed as evidence that they aren't really smart at all.

Kids must of course be allowed to fail, and to learn from their failures. Let us do away with the hodgepodge of ribbons, pins and mass-produced certificates that commemorate everything but real achievement. No more banning schoolyard games that inherently produce winners and losers. If we are constantly rewarding mediocrity, how will children learn the difference between the excellent and the ordinary?

Brushing aside failure and just focusing on the positive is not being a good parent, caregiver or teacher. A child who comes to believe failure is something so terrible that the adults in his life can't acknowledge its existence is a child deprived of the opportunity to discuss mistakes — and a child who therefore can't learn from them.

Our job instead is to instill in children a firm belief that the way to bounce back from failure is to work harder. In other words, try, try again.

People with persistence — the ability to repeatedly respond to failure by exerting more effort instead of simply giving up — rebound well and can sustain their motivation through long periods of delayed gratification. Children who receive rewards too frequently and superfluously will not develop persistence; instead, they'll quit when the rewards disappear.

Praise is important, just not vacuous praise. Researchers have found that to be effective praise needs to be specific, credible and sincere. Again, intelligence alone should not be praised. Effort, true skill or talent, insight, intention, patience, humility, tolerance, and receptiveness to constructive criticism — combined with a determination to learn from it — should be praised.

Instead of saying "you're so smart," parents and teachers should say, "I like how you keep trying." Emphasizing and praising effort gives a child a variable that they can control. They come to see themselves as masters of their destiny. Praising natural intelligence removes destiny from the child's control and provides no good formula for responding to a failure.

Kids should be taught that intelligence is something developed rather than innate. Kids taught thusly are more likely to make effort, to strive no matter the challenge. The concept of teaching kids that the brain is a muscle, and that giving it a harder workout makes you smarter, has been shown to greatly improve young school-age children's study habits and grades.

We should be honest with our children if we feel that they are capable of better work. As parents and

as teachers, we should not be there to make children feel better, but to encourage them to do better.

As parents, what's the bottom line? Love your kids unconditionally. But unconditional love does not require offering unconditional praise.

While there's no mistaking the allure of a life outlook in which you'll make every basket, get every job and reach every star, teaching your children such an outlook does not prepare them for adulthood. And preparing our children for adulthood is our first and largest responsibility as parents.

We should not implant the absurd notion of, "Of course you can do it." Success is not bought and delivered with the currency of happy thoughts. Success is earned through tenacity, patience, scholarship, sacrifice, self-discipline and due diligence.

The best slogan to live by and to teach our children isn't all that inspiring, but it's the truth: Expect failure, but keep trying. Joy is found in the striving. And with persistence, you will have successes.

Savor them and treasure them, for you've earned them through hard work.