

Child Development: The Right Kind of Early Praise Predicts Positive Attitudes Toward Effort

Toddlers who hear praise directed at their efforts, such as “you worked hard on that” are more likely to prefer challenging versus easy tasks and to believe that intelligence and personality can improve with effort than do youngsters who simply hear praise directed at them personally, such as “you’re a good girl,” new research at the University of Chicago reveals.

“The kind of praise focused on effort is called ‘process praise’ and sends the message that effort and actions are the sources of success, leading children to believe they can improve their performance through hard work,” said Elizabeth Gunderson, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Temple University and lead author on the study conducted while she was a graduate student at the University of Chicago.

Another form of praise called “person praise” is focused on the child’s characteristics. Parents using person praise might say “you’re a big boy,” for instance.

The findings, published in the paper “Parent Praise to 1-3 Year Olds Predicts Children’s Motivational Frameworks 5 years Later,” are the first to show the impact of parents’ praise in a naturalistic setting. The study is published on-line in the journal *Child Development* and was conducted by researchers from Stanford as well as the University of Chicago.

Short-term laboratory studies have found that process praise results in greater persistence and better performance on challenging tasks, while person praise, which sends the message that a child’s ability is fixed, results in decreased persistence and performance.

In the new study the scholars found that the percentage of process praise parents used when their children were one to three years old significantly predicted whether children welcomed challenges, had strategies for overcoming failure, and thought intelligence and personality were malleable five years later.

For the study, the team videotaped 53 children and their parents during everyday interactions at home. Each family was videotaped three times, when children were one, two and three years old. From the videotapes, the scholars identified instances in which parents praised their children and classified their praise as either process praise, person praise, or other praise.

Process praise emphasized a child’s effort, strategies, or actions (such as, “you’re trying your best,” “good job counting”). Person praise implied that a child possessed a fixed, positive quality, (“you’re a smart girl,” “you’re good at this”). Other praise included all other types of praise (“you got it,” “great”). They then followed up with the children five years later, when they were 7-8 years old, and assessed whether they preferred challenging versus easy tasks, were able to generate strategies for overcoming setbacks, and believed that intelligence and personality are traits that can be developed (as opposed to ones that are unchangeable).

When parents used a larger percentage of process praise, their children reported more positive approaches to challenges and believed that their traits could improve with effort. However, the other two types of praise (person praise and other praise), and the total amount of praise were not related to children’s responses.

'In addition, parents of boys used a greater percentage of process praise than parents of girls. Later, boys were more likely to have positive attitudes about academic challenges than girls and to believe that intelligence could be improved,' said co-author Susan Levine, the Stella M. Rowley Professor of Psychology at UChicago.

"Our results demonstrate that process praise--praise that emphasizes children's effort, actions, and strategies--predicts children's attitudes toward challenges and their beliefs about trait malleability five years later," Gunderson said. "These findings suggest that improving the quality of early parental praise may help children develop the belief that their future success is in their own hands."

In addition to Gunderson and Levine, other authors were Susan Goldin-Meadow, the Beardsley Ruml Distinguished Service Professor in Psychology at UChicago; Carol S. Dweck, the Lewis & Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford; and Stanford graduate students in psychology Sarah Gripshover and Carissa Romero.

The research was supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and by the National Center for Education Research.

Journal Reference:

Elizabeth A. Gunderson, Sarah J. Gripshover, Carissa Romero, Carol S. Dweck, Susan Goldin-Meadow, Susan C. Levine. Parent Praise to 1- to 3-Year-Olds Predicts Children's Motivational Frameworks 5 Years Later. *Child Development*, 2013; DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12064

Story Source:

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