

The Praise Paradox

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Are we smothering kids in kind words?

By Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman

Illustration by Michael Glenwood

Thomas (his middle name) is a fifth-grader at the highly competitive P.S. 334, the Anderson School on West 84th in New York City. Since Thomas could walk, he has constantly heard that he is smart. Not just from his parents but from any adult who has come in contact with this precocious child. When he applied to Anderson for kindergarten, his intelligence was statistically confirmed. The school is reserved for the top 1 percent of all applicants, and an IQ test is required. Thomas didn't just score in the top 1 percent. He scored in the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent.



But as Thomas has progressed through school, this self-awareness that he's smart hasn't always translated into fearless confidence when attacking his schoolwork. In fact, Thomas's father noticed just the opposite. "Thomas didn't want to try things he wouldn't be successful at," his father says. "Some things came very quickly to him, but when they didn't, he gave up almost immediately, concluding, 'I'm not good at this.'" With no more than a glance, Thomas was dividing the world into two—things he was naturally good at and things he wasn't.

For instance, in the early grades, Thomas wasn't very good at spelling, so he simply demurred from spelling out loud. When Thomas took his first look at fractions, he balked. The biggest hurdle came in third grade. He was supposed to learn cursive penmanship, but he wouldn't even try for weeks. By then, his teacher was demanding homework be completed in cursive. Rather than play catch-up on his penmanship, Thomas refused outright. Thomas's father tried to reason with him. "Look, just because you're smart doesn't mean you don't have to put out some effort." (Eventually, Thomas mastered cursive, but not without a lot of cajoling from his father.)

Why does this child, who is measurably at the very top of the charts, lack confidence about his ability to tackle routine school challenges?

Thomas is not alone. For a few decades, it's been noted that a large percentage of all gifted students (those who score in the top 10 percent on aptitude tests) severely underestimate their own abilities. Those afflicted with this lack of perceived competence adopt lower standards for

success and expect less of themselves. They underrate the importance of effort, and they overrate how much help they need from a parent.

When parents praise their children's intelligence, they believe they are providing the solution to this problem. According to a survey conducted by Columbia University, 85 percent of American parents think it's important to tell their kids that they're smart. In and around the New York area, according to my own (admittedly nonscientific) poll, the number is more like 100 percent. Everyone does it, habitually. "You're so smart, Kiddo," just seems to roll off the tongue.

"Early and often," bragged one mom, of how often she praised. Another dad throws praise around "every chance I get." I heard that kids are going to school with affirming handwritten notes in their lunchboxes and—when they come home—there are star charts on the refrigerator. Boys are earning baseball cards for clearing their plates after dinner, and girls are winning manicures for doing their homework. These kids are saturated with messages that they're doing great—that they are great, innately so. They have what it takes.

The presumption is that if a child believes he's smart (having been told so, repeatedly), he won't be intimidated by new academic challenges. The constant praise is meant to be an angel on the shoulder, ensuring that children do not sell their talents short.

But a growing body of research—and a new study from the trenches of the New York City public school system—strongly suggest it might be the other way around. Giving kids the label of "smart" does not prevent them from underperforming. It might actually be causing it.

For the past ten years, Dr. Carol Dweck and her team at Columbia University have studied the effect of praise on students in 20 New York schools. Her seminal work—a series of experiments on 400 fifth-graders—paints the picture most clearly. Prior to these experiments, praise for intelligence had been shown to boost children's confidence. But Dweck suspected that this would backfire the first moment kids experienced failure or difficulty.

Dweck sent four female research assistants into New York fifth-grade classrooms. The researchers would take a single child out of the classroom for a nonverbal IQ test consisting of a series of puzzles—puzzles easy enough that all the children would do fairly well. Once the child finished the test, the researchers told each student his score, then gave him a single line of praise. Randomly divided into groups, some were praised for their intelligence. They were told, "You must be smart at this." Other students were praised for their effort: "You must have worked really hard."

Why just a single line of praise? "We wanted to see how sensitive children were," Dweck explained. "We had a hunch that one line might be enough to see an effect."

Then the students were given a choice of test for the second round. One choice was a test that would be more difficult than the first, but the researchers told the kids that they'd learn a lot from attempting the puzzles. The other choice, Dweck's team explained, was an easy test, just

like the first. Of those praised for their effort, 90 percent chose the harder set of puzzles. Of those praised for their intelligence, a majority chose the easy test. The “smart” kids took the cop-out.

Why did this happen? “When we praise children for their intelligence,” Dweck wrote in her study summary, “we tell them that this is the name of the game: look smart, don’t risk making mistakes.” And that’s what the fifth-graders had done. They’d chosen to look smart and avoid the risk of being embarrassed.

In a subsequent round, none of the fifth-graders had a choice. The test was difficult, designed for kids two years ahead of their grade level. Predictably, everyone failed. But again, the two groups of children, divided at random at the study’s start, responded differently. Those praised for their effort on the first test assumed they simply hadn’t focused hard enough on this test. “They got very involved, willing to try every solution to the puzzles,” Dweck recalled. “Many of them remarked, unprovoked, ‘This is my favorite test.’” Not so for those praised for their smarts. They assumed their failure was evidence that they weren’t really smart at all. “Just watching them, you could see the strain. They were sweating and miserable.”

Having artificially induced a round of failure, Dweck’s researchers then gave all the fifth-graders a final round of tests that were engineered to be as easy as the first round. Those who had been praised for their effort significantly improved on their first score—by about 30 percent. Those who’d been told they were smart did worse than they had at the very beginning—by about 20 percent.

Dweck had suspected that praise could backfire, but even she was surprised by the magnitude of the effect. “Emphasizing effort gives a child a variable that they can control,” she explains. “They come to see themselves as in control of their success. Emphasizing natural intelligence takes it out of the child’s control, and it provides no good recipe for responding to a failure.”

In follow-up interviews, Dweck discovered that those who think that innate intelligence is the key to success begin to discount the importance of effort. I am smart, the kids’ reasoning goes; I don’t need to put out effort. Expending effort becomes stigmatized—it’s public proof that you can’t cut it on your natural gifts.

Repeating her experiments, Dweck found this effect of praise on performance held true for students of every socioeconomic class. It hit both boys and girls—the very brightest girls especially (they collapsed the most following failure). Even preschoolers weren’t immune to the inverse power of praise.

Even those who’ve accepted the new research on praise have trouble putting it into practice. Sue Needleman is both a mother of two and an elementary school teacher with 11 years’ experience. Last year, she was a fourth-grade teacher at Ridge Ranch Elementary in Paramus, New Jersey. She has never heard of Carol Dweck, but the gist of Dweck’s research has trickled down to her school, and Needleman has learned to say, “I like how you keep trying.”

She tries to keep her praise specific, rather than general, so that a child knows exactly what she did to earn the praise (and thus can get more). She will occasionally tell a child, “You’re good at math,” but she’ll never tell a child he’s bad at math.

But that’s at school, as a teacher. At home, old habits die hard. Her eight-year-old daughter and her five-year-old son are indeed smart, and sometimes she hears herself saying, “You’re great. You did it. You’re smart.” When I press her on this, Needleman says that what comes out of academia often feels artificial. “When I read the mock dialogues, my first thought is, Oh, please. How corny.”

No such qualms exist for teachers at the Life Sciences Secondary School in East Harlem, because they’ve seen Dweck’s theories applied to their junior high students. Dweck and her protégée, Dr. Lisa Blackwell, published a report in the academic journal *Child Development* about the effect of a semester-long intervention conducted to improve students’ math scores.

Life Sciences is a health-science magnet school with high aspirations but 700 students whose main attributes are being predominantly minority and low achieving. Blackwell split her kids into two groups for an eight-session workshop. The control group was taught study skills, and the others got study skills and a special module on how intelligence is not innate. These students took turns reading aloud an essay on how the brain grows new neurons when challenged. They saw slides of the brain and acted out skits. “Even as I was teaching these ideas,” Blackwell noted, “I would hear the students joking, calling one another ‘dummy’ or ‘stupid.’” After the module was concluded, Blackwell tracked her students’ grades to see if it had any effect.

It didn’t take long. The teachers—who hadn’t known which students had been assigned to which workshop—could pick out the students who had been taught that intelligence can be developed. They improved their study habits and grades. In a single semester, Blackwell reversed the students’ longtime trend of decreasing math grades.

The only difference between the control group and the test group were two lessons, a total of 50 minutes spent teaching not math but a single idea: that the brain is a muscle. Giving it a harder workout makes you smarter. That alone improved their math scores.

“These are very persuasive findings,” says Columbia’s Dr. Geraldine Downey, a specialist in children’s sensitivity to rejection. “They show how you can take a specific theory and develop a curriculum that works.”

Psychologist Wulf-Uwe Meyer, a pioneer in the field, conducted a series of studies during which children watched other students receive praise. According to Meyer’s findings, by the age of 12, children believe that earning praise from a teacher is not a sign you did well—it’s actually a sign you lack ability and the teacher thinks you need extra encouragement. They’ve picked up the pattern: kids who are falling behind get drowned in praise. Teens, Meyer found, discounted praise to such an extent that they believed it’s a teacher’s criticism that really conveys a positive belief in a student’s aptitude.

Excessive praise also distorts children's motivation; they begin doing things merely to hear the praise, losing sight of intrinsic enjoyment. Scholars from Reed College and Stanford reviewed over 150 praise studies. Their analysis determined that praised students become risk-averse and lack perceived autonomy. The scholars found consistent correlations between a liberal use of praise and students' "shorter task persistence, more eye-checking with the teacher, and inflected speech such that answers have the intonation of questions." When they get to college, heavily praised students commonly drop out of classes rather than suffer a mediocre grade, and they have a hard time picking a major—they're afraid to commit to something because they're afraid of not succeeding.

One suburban New Jersey high school English teacher told me she can spot the kids who get overpraised at home. Their parents think they're just being supportive, but the students sense their parents' high expectations, and feel so much pressure they can't concentrate on the subject, only the grade they will receive. "I had a mother say, 'You are destroying my child's self-esteem,' because I'd given her son a C. I told her, 'Your child is capable of better work.' I'm not there to make them feel better. I'm there to make them do better."

When students transition into junior high, some who'd done well in elementary school inevitably struggle in the larger and more demanding environment. Those who equated their earlier success with their innate ability surmise they've been dumb all along. Their grades never recover because the likely key to their recovery—increasing effort—they view as just further proof of their failure. In interviews many confess they would "seriously consider cheating."

Students turn to cheating because they haven't developed a strategy for handling failure. The problem is compounded when a parent ignores a child's failures and insists that he'll do it better next time. Michigan scholar Jennifer Crocker studies this exact scenario and explains that the child may come to believe failure is something so terrible, the family can't acknowledge its existence. A child deprived of the opportunity to discuss mistakes can't learn from them.

Offering praise has become a sort of panacea for the anxieties of modern parenting. Out of our children's lives from breakfast to dinner, we turn it up a notch when we get home. In those few hours together, we want them to hear things we can't say during the day—We are in your corner, we are here for you, we believe in you.

In a similar way, we put our children in high-pressure environments, seeking out the best schools we can find, then we use the constant praise to soften the intensity of those environments. We expect so much of them, but we hide our expectations behind constant glowing praise. For me, the duplicity became glaring.

I realized that not telling my son he was smart meant I was leaving it up to him to make his own conclusion about his intelligence. Jumping in with praise is like jumping in too soon with the answer to a homework problem—it robs him of the chance to make the deduction himself.

But what if he makes the wrong conclusion?

Can I really leave this up to him, at his age?

I'm still an anxious parent. This morning, I tested him on the way to school: "What happens to your brain, again, when it gets to think about something hard?"

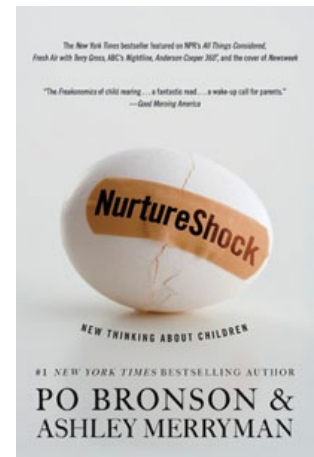
"It gets bigger, like a muscle," he responded, having aced this one before.



Po Bronson and **Ashley Merryman's** *Time* and *New York Magazine* articles on the science of parenting have won several prestigious awards.

Nurture Shock has been cited in more than two dozen scholarly journals and is being taught in universities around the country. [Learn more about the book.](#)

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