

Are You Overpraising Your Child?

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“I love it!”

It’s a phrase I’ve uttered countless times, typically in response to a new offering from our family’s artist-in-residence, also known as my 6-year-old daughter. I’m being honest — it’s a treat when she dedicates her work to me, rather than the parent with higher approval ratings (her mother, my wife), and I take a fatherly pride in her choice of colors and attention to detail. But it turns out, I’m also undermining her efforts, by putting myself, and my approval, at the center of the conversation.

It seems like the right thing to say. After all, how many times have we parents been told that it’s better to pre-emptively praise (and reward) the behavior we want our children to demonstrate, rather than waiting to condemn them for misbehaving. But, as leading researcher [Wendy S. Grolnick, Ph.D.](#), a professor of psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., puts it, praise also has a dark side.

This is because praising the outcome (“It’s beautiful!”) or the person (“You’re so smart!”) encourages the child to focus on those things. She might feel performance anxiety. He might question the conditionality of your love. (“If I’m a smart boy when I do this, I must be a stupid boy when I don’t.”) He might become more motivated by a parent’s pleasure than by the process that led to it. Future crayon masterpieces might become less fun for him to create — or disappear altogether when they’re not as highly praised.

Here’s a guide to praising — or not praising — your child.

Praise the process, not the person.

As part of the self-esteem movement in the 1970s, parents were often told to give their children positive feedback along the lines of “Great job” or “You’re so smart.” This was in contrast to the more removed and discipline-oriented parenting styles of earlier generations, and was intended to be warmer and healthier.

But researchers — notably [Carol S. Dweck Ph.D.](#), a professor of psychology at Stanford’s Graduate School of Education — studying the effect of this type of praise in the late ’90s found that it could have a harmful effect. Her research showed that children felt pressured to live up to their parents’ praise, and this in turn could lead to panic and anxiety. Even kids who didn’t experience anxiety became risk-averse, developing what Dr. Dweck later termed a [“fixed mind-set.”](#) These children were afraid to challenge themselves out of fear of letting down their parents. Dr. Grolnick said this kind of praise can be considered controlling — undermining a child’s enjoyment of and motivation for certain activities by shifting the goal to pleasing a parent.

Dr. Dweck and others researched what happened when children were praised on their efforts, instead of

their selves. It turned out, these children gained confidence and felt empowered to try new things. In one example from [her 1998 research](#), after completing a series of matrices, one group of children was told they were successful because they were smart. A second group was told they were successful because they worked hard. When presented with a new range of puzzles, children in the second group were far likelier to choose a more challenging problem. Dr. Dweck also found that these children said they enjoyed solving problems more than those in the first group, and the researchers concluded they did so because they had confidence in their abilities. She found that even if they failed at first, they were capable of working through the solution by applying themselves, a life skill almost every parent would want for his or her children.

Pay close attention to your child’s process.

Of course, there are only so many times you can say, “You must have worked really hard on that!” To provide meaningful process praise, you have to pay attention to the process itself.

Kyla Haimovitz, Ph.D., a learning engineer at the [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative](#) who co-wrote a [2017 paper on the topic](#) with Dr. Dweck, said that praise doesn’t have to be immediate. If your child is working on a drawing, for example, you don’t need to comment on every color selection. Wait until the end, when your child shows you the drawing, and then say something like, “Ooh, I see you chose to put the purple next to the brown — that’s so interesting!”

“You can instead ask them about their process to be able to praise their learning process,” Dr. Haimovitz said. “It also allows the children to evaluate themselves, rather than have an external evaluation.” In other words, your questions will in turn encourage your child to ask him or herself those same questions, sparking curiosity and exploration.

Praise what your child has control over.

We communicate our values through praise, according to [Patricia Smiley, Ph.D.](#), a professor of psychological science at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif. One of those values is autonomy, so it’s helpful to praise what your child has control over, such as the choices they made along the way of solving a problem or drawing a picture. This helps keep expectations realistic, she said, and it also encourages them to continue doing the activity. “It goes to the intrinsic interests of the child,” Dr. Smiley said. “A parent says, ‘I see.’ It can make the child feel like, ‘Ooh, what I’m doing is fun, and my parent thinks it’s fun, too.’ They connect a parent’s good feeling with their own good feeling.”

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