



There is a right way — and a wrong way — to applaud a child

To praise or not to praise How to cheer on your kids without sacrificing their self-esteem

We all praise our kids. It may be that praising our kids is the #1 thing that most of us do. We do it because that's how they get self-esteem. At least that's what we think. We tell them how great they are, they know they're great, right?

Wrong.
Carol Dweck, professor of psychology at Stanford University, says: "My research shows that praise for intelligence or ability backfires.... What we've shown is that when you praise someone, say, 'You're smart at this,' the next time they struggle, they think they're not."

It's really about praising the process they engage in, not how smart they are or how good they are at it, but taking on difficulty, trying many different strategies, sticking to it and achieving over time." Dweck further found that this phenomenon affects girls more than boys.

The downside of generic praise is that when you tell a kid

how smart or athletic or good-looking they are, they worry:

"What if I'm not that smart/athletic/good-looking tomorrow or the next day? What if I'm really an imposter and I've just managed to fool people temporarily? Will you not love or value me as much when you find out I'm not that person?"

What's the bottom line? If our goal is to raise kids with high self-esteem, we need to change how we praise them.

But let's not settle for the self-esteem goal. It's good but it's not enough. Let's also add character traits to our child-rearing goals. Traits like perseverance and working hard and kindness.

These are all things our kids can try to do, these are behaviours they can control. And that's the key to praise that works.

Instead of the boilerplate praise for qualities the child cannot control or create (like being smart or athletic or

gorgeous) we need to use specific behaviour-based praise. When a child hears that kind of praise, they know that through their own effort they accomplished something valuable, and because they themselves made it happen, they can make it happen again.

Such as: "You worked really hard studying for that test. I'm proud of you." As opposed to: "You aced the test. See, you are smart."

The latter creates an anxious response: What if it was a fluke? Maybe I'm not really that smart. Whereas the former teaches kids that they have agency and power over their outcomes. It also reinforces the value of hard work — another parenting goal.

When we praise how hard the child worked, we're communicating to them that we value that behaviour, which makes them want to do more of it.

And we're helping them feel good about themselves for being that kind of person — the kind who works hard. It's a positive self-feeding loop.

Precisely the same results occur when you praise any other specific behaviour your child demonstrated. You praise it, you get more of it and they value themselves for it: It was really hard mastering that back walkover and you stuck with it till you got it.... That piano piece was complicated and you persevered in learning it.... You worked so hard at memorizing that long poem, you didn't give up.... It must have been scary going out on the ice against that team of bigger kids but you did it anyway, you found your courage.... The teacher told me that when a few kids excluded Sammy at recess, you asked him into your game. That was so kind of you.

What have we praised? Perseverance, hard work, bravery in the face of fear, kindness.

These are all behaviours that our kids can control and replicate. And they will, especially if we show how much we value them.

**JOANNIE
KATES**



Parenting columnist Joanne Kates is an expert educator in the area of conflict mediation, self-esteem and anti-bullying, and she is the director of Camp Arrowton in Algonquin Park.