

The Praise a Child Should Never Hear

Praise, long considered the cure to a host of childhood and societal problems, might in fact be a problem for kids, writes novelist and journalist Po Bronson in [New York Magazine](#). Parents might enjoy calling their children smart, but it can play havoc with a child's ability to learn.

For decades, child psychologists and educators had operated under the assumption that praise boosts self-esteem and, ultimately, performance. But after some of the early research on praise was called into question, some psychologists have begun looking at whether complimenting children on their innate abilities actually could hurt them.

Mr. Bronson highlights a study of 400 fifth-graders conducted by psychologist Carol Dweck and a team at Columbia University in which the children took three tests. The second test purposely was made difficult enough that every child failed. What the scientists found was that kids who had been praised for their *effort* recovered from that failure by the third test to achieve scores 30% higher than on their first test. Meanwhile, the students who were praised for their *intelligence* had scores that were 20% lower. Ms. Dweck's conclusion: You should praise children for qualities they can control, like effort. Those praised for their innate brainpower might develop the sense that hard work isn't necessary.

Applying this research to his own life, Mr. Bronson finds his child responds well to process-centered praise (good work chasing down the ball). The problem is, Mr. Bronson discovers he misses giving his child unconditional compliments ("You're great — I'm proud of you"). "We expect so much of [our children], but we hide our expectations behind constant glowing praise." Being too quick with praise can be as detrimental as jumping in too soon to help with a homework problem — it robs kids of the rewards of discovering how smart they are on their own. — *Robin Moroney*