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growing up

*your guide to
helping them thrive*



Rehab a Praise Junkie

In trying to boost kids' self-esteem, we may be tearing it down. Learn how to build **CONFIDENCE** the healthy way

BY SASHA EMMONS

Readers, we have some news that may be seriously hard to take—but after the shock has worn off, we promise your family will be better off because of it. Ready? Here goes: Millions of American children (including very possibly your own) have a warped idea of what they can do and little concept of what real confidence feels like. And despite only our best intentions, experts say parents have no one to blame but themselves. The reason? Our kids are addicted to praise. *Ouch.*

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START THE DETOX!

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How “Good Job!” Can Go Too Far

There is absolutely nothing wrong with being proud of your kids and wanting them to know how you feel so they feel good, too. The problem is that it’s incredibly easy to go overboard. “Parents think that by heaping compliments on their kids, no matter what they do or don’t do, they’re nurturing self-esteem,” says Jim Taylor, Ph.D., author of *Positive Pushing: How to Raise a Successful and Happy Child*. But that’s not how it works.

Self-esteem depends on your *internal* ability to generate positive feelings about your accomplishments—it’s not something other people can give you. And though it seems counterintuitive, kids actually develop it by struggling and sometimes falling short when they face new challenges. Nonstop cheerleading can short-circuit that process and trigger a cascade of changes that ultimately erode kids’ confidence.

First, it can lead to that entitled I-can-do-no-wrong type of thinking. “We have a generation that believes you can become rich and successful without any effort,” says Taylor.

More concerning, though, is that kids can become hooked on the happy rush that comes with every “You’re so awesome!” (Who wouldn’t?!) Over time, their motivation may come to depend on it. Even worse, they may be unable to achieve much without it. The reason? They have no real proof of their capabilities and begin to doubt themselves entirely.

“Kids may decide: I’m okay only if someone is telling me I

Not every
effort can
be super!



am,” says Jane Nelsen, Ed.D., author and co-author of the Positive Discipline series of books and classes. The pattern often results in an intense fear of mistakes. They may think they’ll be perceived as stupid or that they’ll lose friends because of it. “The most hurtful perception these kids often have is that their parents won’t love them anymore,” says Taylor. Cue the stab to the heart.

The Science of Healthy Praise

To see just how quickly different types of praise can affect kids’ behavior and self-esteem, consider this seminal study done by researchers at Columbia University: Scientists gave a group of kids a series of puzzles to solve. The first one was very easy, and afterward, some kids were praised for being smart while others were praised for

growing up

KIDS CAN BEGIN TO DOUBT THEIR CAPABILITIES UNLESS SOMEONE ELSE REINFORCES THEM. "THEY THINK: I'M ONLY OKAY IF SOMEONE TELLS ME I AM."

working hard. Then the researchers gave the kids a choice: Do another simple puzzle or try a more challenging one. The kids who'd been declared smart tended to take the easy way out, while the hard workers tried the toughie. Finally, to gauge how well the kids rebounded from failure, both groups were given two more puzzles—another difficult one followed by a series of simple ones. Once again, the hard workers solved more puzzles and performed better overall.

Here's what happened: When the researchers praised kids' effort, they were priming them

to be more resilient. Because the kids didn't expect success to come easily, they felt more confident to take risks. Most important, they didn't hang their sense of self-worth on the outcome, says Sylvia Rodriguez, Ph.D, director of Mindset Works, an online learning program based on these and similar findings. All that mattered was that they tried their best.

The other group had just the opposite reaction. When these kids couldn't live up to their "smart" reputation, they weren't inclined to try—and possibly fail—again. Their self-esteem was very much wrapped up in *how* they did rather than *what*. That one-track way of thinking leads kids to believe they have no control over what they can achieve and contributes to lower feelings of self-esteem.

4 Signs Your Kid Needs to Detox

Before you start beating yourself up for the thousands of times you've told your child how smart she is, know this: It's not too late for praise intervention. If she

THE OVER-PRAISE PREVENTION PLAN

If your child is younger than 4, here's how to keep from falling into the trap in the first place.

If you're the mom of a preschooler, you're used to hearing "Look at me!" over and over. It's natural for little kids to look to their parents for approval, says Dr. Nelsen.

But instead of swooning every time, just stick to the facts. Keep your comments

observational ("You drew a big dog!" or "Look at you, getting dressed by yourself!") instead of judgmental ("This is the best drawing ever!").

Also remember that small children have a more finely honed BS detector than we give them credit for. It's

okay to act like a stack of blocks is just a stack of blocks, not the Empire State Building. Kids may buy into the gushing at first. But when failures or objective critiques of his abilities inevitably come, he'll start to doubt himself—along with your sincerity.



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growing up



exhibits any of the following behaviors, it may be time to start making some changes—our five-step program makes it easy.

She's afraid of risk. Does the thought of fumbling while reading in class give her a tummy ache? Kids who have not been allowed to own goof-ups are terrified of mistakes, says Dr. Taylor. Another sign: If something is hard at first, such as ice skating, she's unwilling to try it again.

She's not motivated. Kids who depend on compliments for fuel run out of gas when the hits stop. Can she do her homework or practice piano without you giving props? If not, it may be a sign she's grown dependent on them.

He's a bragger. Kids who seem to hold the highest opinions of themselves are often the ones with the shakiest self-image, says Dr. Taylor. "It's threatening to allow that they may not be incredible," he says. Of course, it's possible your kid does excel, but if he boasts without the goods to back it up, rethink how you're praising.

He's unsure of his talent (even if he's got it). Take Christy Horafas's son, an All-Star basketball player. "When he had an off game, he'd cry, 'I stink!'" says the Long Island, NY, mom, who admits she was free with the you're amazings. Repeatedly telling kids how great they are robs them of being able to assess their abilities, a process of trial and error.

THE 5-STEP PROGRAM

Start weaning him off the need for kudos with this expert advice:

1. Notice the effort

Innate talents or attributes like a high IQ are not something for kids to be proud of. Instead, emphasize qualities they have control over, like perseverance.



2. Ask questions

"How did you feel when you were playing?" "Did you feel prepared for the orchestra concert?" Listening is a better way of nurturing self-esteem than telling.

3. Resist making it all better

The second he gets stuck on a math equation, do you tell him how to do it? "One of the worst things you can do is rush in to fix things," says Dr. Nelsen. "Tell him you have faith in him and let him figure it out. He'll learn that trying gets him to the other side of a problem." Even better, it fosters a sense of ownership over his life.

4. Flip mistakes

Nelsen recommends recasting them as opportunities, pointing out what she can learn from the experience. And share mistakes you've made so kids know its okay to be flawed. "Remind them that failing once doesn't necessarily mean they'll fail again," says Dr. Taylor. "The reason most people succeed is that they hung in there."

5. Stay low-key

So it wasn't exactly his best swim meet. It's fine to say nothing, says Dr. Taylor, and just talk about, say, dinner options when you get in the car. If he wants to talk, listen more than analyze. And if you're asked point-blank "How did I do?," you can ask him how *he* thinks he did—then refer back to #4. And sometimes just a squeeze on the shoulder tells them everything they need to know.

HOW TO TALK SO KIDS WILL THRIVE

WHAT TO AVOID	WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD	WHY
"Good job!"	Be specific: "I like the detail on that" or "I can tell you took your time on your handwriting."	The purpose of encouragement should be to promote positive behaviors, and the bland "good job" doesn't provide useful information.
"Good girl!" or "Good boy!"	"You look like you feel pretty happy with yourself!"	This throwaway tells your child he is only "good" when other people say he is, says Dr. Nelsen. Plus, it ties his overall worth to how he behaves on a single occasion.
"You are so incredible!"	"You must be proud of yourself!" or for the big deals: "I'm proud of you." Just don't jump up and down while saying it!	Over-the-top reactions, even to MVP performances, do more harm than good. Kids think "If Mom gets this excited when I succeed, how will she feel when I don't?"
"Did your team win?"	"Did you have fun?" or "Tell me all about the game."	Asking the score implies winning is all that matters. But sports are also about exercise, camaraderie, and skill-building. And the score often doesn't reflect the players' effort.
"You're so smart!"	"I could tell you wouldn't give up" or "It seems like you worked so hard!" Hone in on what she did to make it happen.	By calling out a natural gift, something in theory she'd have no control over, you subtly imply that her achievement was simply luck, says Dr. Taylor.