



Praise That Makes Learners More Resilient

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“You’re so smart at that!” “You’re so talented!” Common sense suggests that telling students they are the best will make them feel confident and motivated. And it feels good to tell children things that will make them feel good.

BUT THIS TYPE OF PRAISE CAN BACKFIRE. Praise is an opportunity to show a child why you think she succeeded. And getting praised for ability tells children that what’s valued is a fixed trait or talent. You either have it or you don’t. It highlights the fact that children are being judged or evaluated. This can make children feel helpless if they feel like they’re being judged on the basis of something they have “no control over. So it’s important to show children that what adults really value is something children can control: their effort, their problem-solving strategies, and seeking help when they really need it.

WHAT YOU PRAISE SENDS A MESSAGE ABOUT WHAT YOU VALUE

Different types of praise send different messages. *Person* praise (“You’re a good drawer!”) sends the message that adults value the trait or ability. *Process* praise (“You worked hard and

did a good job drawing!”) sends the message that adults value the effort or process. When students succeed, these types of praise teach students different reasons for their success. *Person* praise implies to students that success is due to fixed traits that they possess, but can’t control. *Process* praise implies that success is due to their effort and the strategy they used, which they *can* control.

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When praise really matters is later, when students inevitably struggle or make a mistake. And this is the time that we care about the most, because the goal of education is to help children learn things that they don’t already know. Eventually, all children should be working at the frontiers of what they know how to do, taking on challenging tasks that will help them grow.

So how does praise affect how students react to later struggles?

**MINDSET
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Hosted at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, the Mindset Scholars Network is a group of leading social scientists dedicated to improving student outcomes and expanding educational opportunity by advancing our scientific understanding of students’ mindsets about learning and school.

PERSON PRAISE UNDERMINES RESILIENCE AFTER SETBACKS

Person praise that focuses on students' ability ties their sense of self-worth to the feedback they get: when it's positive, they feel good about themselves; but when it's negative, they feel bad about themselves.¹ This leaves children vulnerable after they struggle or experience a setback. When they make a mistake, it implies that they are NOT smart or good, which can make them feel helpless. They feel they can't do anything to fix the situation. They often feel negative emotions, feel bad about themselves, and want to quit the task. They get fixated on errors (their own and other children's).² They often continue to perform poorly.

PROCESS PRAISE ENCOURAGES RESILIENCE AND MOTIVATION

In contrast, process praise that emphasizes students' effort or strategy is more likely to lead to resilient responses after negative feedback or failure. Children can still feel positive emotions even after mistakes, because their value as a person hasn't been called into question.

There's no need to feel bad about themselves, since the mistake was due to the process they used, or other factors they can change. The mistake tells them that maybe more effort was needed, so they should just

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try harder next time. Or that a new strategy is required, so they should try something different or seek help from a teacher if they really need it. These children are usually more willing to try again and put more effort in. They often can bounce back and do better on the next try.

PRAISE WORKS BY FEEDING INTO MINDSETS ABOUT ABILITY

So how does process praise promote positive motivation in students? Praise affects students' mindsets about ability and thenature of learning, and these mindsets about

ability affect their motivation. Person praise emphasizes deep internal causes for success. This highlights unchanging ability, leading to a *fixed mindset* about ability. Process praise emphasizes the process used by the student. This highlights the effort controlled by the student, leading to a *growth mindset* about ability.

This is why praise can have such powerful effects—because it feeds into these mindsets about ability, which can get reinforced over time in ways that increase or decrease students' motivation. When students who have come to hold a fixed mindset struggle and then give up, it feeds into their belief that they don't have the ability and never will. In contrast, when students holding a growth mindset struggle and then try harder, it often leads to success, which reinforces their belief that they can get better.

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Different types of praise lead to mindsets about ability, which affect students' motivation and reactions to setbacks in school

	FIXED MINDSET	GROWTH MINDSET
<i>Definition</i>	Belief that ability is a <i>fixed</i> trait that cannot change	Belief that ability is <i>malleable</i> and can be developed
<i>Praise that reinforces the mindset</i>	<i>Person praise</i> : conveys success is due to your ability	<i>Process praise</i> : conveys success is due to your effort and strategies
<i>Interpretation of effort</i>	Effort is <i>bad</i> ; if you're smart, you shouldn't have to work hard	Effort is <i>good</i> ; it's how you get better
<i>Motivation in school</i>	What matters is looking smart, so you can <i>prove</i> your ability	What matters is learning, so you can <i>improve</i> your ability
<i>Behavioral response to academic setbacks</i>	<i>Helplessness</i> ; setback is a sign that you don't have what it takes	<i>Resilience</i> ; setback is a sign that you need to work harder or try a new strategy
<i>Meaning of failure</i>	Failure is the <i>end of the story</i> : time to give up	Failure is the <i>beginning of the story</i> : time to try again

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE THAT PRAISE MATTERS

In one classic study, some children were chosen at random to be praised for their ability (“Wow, that’s a good score. You must be really smart at this”). These children were more likely to report that ability is fixed—to have a fixed mindset. The other children in the study were praised for their effort (“Wow, that’s a good score. You must have worked really hard at this”). These children were more likely to report that ability could be improved with effort—to have a growth mindset.³

The children praised for ability were more concerned about continuing to show their high ability, so they avoided challenging tasks. Despite performing equally well at the beginning of the study, children praised for

ability were also more vulnerable after failure. They lied about their scores on the test rather than admit that they hadn’t done well. In contrast, the children praised for effort were more willing to take on challenging tasks in the future. They weren’t ashamed to share their scores, and they performed better on the next round of testing.

REAL-WORLD PARENTAL PRAISE CAN FEED INTO MINDSETS ABOUT ABILITY

Praise matters in the real world, not just in scientific experiments. It can also make a big difference over time. In one study, 8- to 12-year old children whose mothers gave more person praise were more likely to have fixed mindsets about ability and less likely to take on challenges six months later.⁴

Praise also matters from an early age. Another study found that when toddlers received more process praise, they were more likely to hold a growth mindset five years later.⁵ Children are listening, and these messages about what matters for success add up.

PRAISE ABOUT GROUPS ALSO CREATES A FIXED MINDSET

Praise directed to an individual child can affect him or her. But praise can also affect his or her motivation when it's directed toward a group. For example, children in a research study who heard praise about a gender group ("Boys are really good at that game")

lost motivation and did worse at the game compared to children who heard praise about an individual ("There's a boy who's really good at that game") or children who heard no praise.^{6,7}

Importantly, it didn't matter whether the praise was about the children's own gender—they still did worse. When we praise groups like this, it implies that there's something fixed about the group. It highlights the idea that ability is something that some people have while other people don't, and therefore reinforces a fixed mindset.

HOW TO PRAISE TO ENCOURAGE GREATER MOTIVATION

For parents and teachers who are used to giving person praise, what are some examples of better ways to praise? What kinds of praise can foster growth mindsets about ability, and motivate students to take on challenging work that will help them grow as learners?

The key is to keep the focus on the student and their learning experience. It's important to give specific comments that help students identify what they did that helped them succeed. This way, they can try to do it again in the future.

PRAISE TIP #1 *Highlight students' use of strategies and resourcefulness*

Parents can praise the process of studying. Anything that emphasizes the student's concentration, persistence, or careful thought is helpful, such as, "You studied really effectively for that test and it paid off!" They can also praise the use of strategies, "You thought of a new strategy when the old one didn't work, and that one worked," or resourcefulness, "That was a good place to look for ideas about how to solve the problem."

PRAISE TIP #2 *Emphasize students' persistence and the fun of succeeding at challenging tasks*

It's also valuable to highlight students' persistence, "I know that took a lot of time and work, but you stuck to it and got it done," and to recognize when students take on challenges and stretch themselves, "You took on the bigger challenge and you succeeded!" Another helpful approach is to emphasize the fun of challenging yourself, "That was really hard. You must have had fun figuring it out!" Parents and teachers can also show how mistakes are useful, "That was a wonderful mistake. Let's learn from it!"

PRAISE TIP #3 *The more process praise you can give, the better*

For parents or teachers who struggle to stop the habit of giving person praise, it's important to keep in mind that their own effort matters. It doesn't have to be all or nothing. But the more process praise they can give relative to person praise, the more children will benefit.⁸ This table gives some examples of how common person praise can be translated into process praise that benefits students. As with all skills, the more parents and teachers practice, the better they can get at giving process praise.

Try to pay attention to *how* you praise your students. If you're using person praise, can you modify your language to focus on the process instead? Below are a few examples of common person praise utterances and suggestions for ways to use process praise instead.

INSTEAD OF THIS (Person-Praise)	TRY THIS (Process-Praise)
Great job! You must be smart at this.	Great job! You must have worked really hard.
See, you are good at English. You got an A on your last test.	You really studied for your English test and your improvement shows it.
You got it! I told you that you were smart.	I like the way you tried all kinds of strategies on that math problem until you finally got it.
You are such a good student!	I love the way you stayed at your desk, you kept your concentration, and you kept on working. That's great!

[SOURCE: CREATED BY PERTS](#)

HOW ADULTS' MINDSETS SHAPE THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN

Recent studies by members of the Mindset Scholars Network and others suggest that adults' own mindsets about ability can influence the way they interact with and praise students. These behaviors can then affect students' mindsets and motivation.

Teachers' mindsets about ability affect how they interact with their students. Teachers who have fixed mindsets are more likely to assume students who do poorly have low ability or aren't smart enough.⁹ Even one bad test grade is enough to lower these teachers' expectations. They don't believe these students can improve with effort. Instead, they try to console or comfort students, to make them feel better about their low ability. They report being more likely to give these students less homework, tell them "not everyone can be a math person," or encourage older students to drop the class.

Unfortunately, these types of feedback demotivate students. In a study with college students, students picked up on the teachers' mindsets and low expectations for them. Students who got these types of messages felt less encouraged by their teacher, less motivated, and had lower expectations for themselves. Even when these teachers have good intentions, their fixed mindsets about ability can have a negative impact on students' motivation.

Parents' and teachers' own mindsets about ability can also affect children because they change the way adults talk about ability. Parents who have a growth mindset about ability are more likely to use process language when they talk to their children.¹⁰ They highlight the importance of hard work and strategies. When they talk about success, they say things like, "She studied and practiced a lot," or "Her teacher helped her learned the concepts." But parents who have a fixed mindset about ability are more likely to

use person language. They highlight the importance of stable traits. When they talk about success, they say things like, “Some people are just good at math,” or “Not everyone is a rocket scientist.” These types of comments clearly communicate to children what adults in their lives value.

Adults’ attitudes and reactions toward failure also matter. Some parents believe that failure is positive: it helps you learn and do better in the future. In a recent study, these mindsets about failure predicted how parents interacted with their child after they failed a test.¹¹ Parents with a “failure-is-positive” mindset were more likely to say they would encourage their child

to think about what she’d learned from the failure. Parents with a “failure-is-negative” mindset were more likely to say they would worry about their child’s ability.

In turn, these interactions affected their children, who picked up on their parents’ beliefs by observing their reactions. Children of parents with a failure-is-positive mindset believed that their parents cared about how much they learned. These children were also more likely to have a growth mindset about ability. In contrast, children of parents with a failure-is-negative mindset believed that their parents cared about how well they performed. These children were more likely to have a fixed mindset about ability.

HOW TO GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

Process praise is more beneficial than person praise. But another important idea for parents and teachers to remember is that both praise and criticism should be honest and sincere. This can be hard, because feedback that is too negative may hurt students’ feelings or self-esteem. Teachers who worry about hurting students’ feelings may give students more positive feedback than they deserve.¹²

Ironically, this kind of inflated praise tends to happen most often for students who have low self-esteem or other reasons to doubt the honesty of the praiser.¹³ But giving dishonest positive praise can backfire. It deprives students of honest feedback and takes away their chance to learn from constructive criticism. It may lead to greater disappointment and confusion down the road, especially when students experience setbacks. It may also make them distrustful of genuine praise in the future, seeing it as fake or a sign of lowered expectations.

So how can teachers and parents motivate students who need to improve? The key is providing constructive feedback, which has two important features that work together to increase students’ motivation and reinforce growth mindsets about ability.¹⁴

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM TIP #1 *Be honest*

The first part is to give honest feedback about students’ performance. This helps them see where they went wrong, and what they still need to learn.

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM TIP #2 *Let students know you hold them to a high standard*

The second part is to show students that they are being held to a high standard. This conveys to students that the teacher respects them and believes in their potential to achieve. A critical part of self-esteem is the belief that you are respected by the people that you care about. This is far more helpful to students than getting dishonest praise. It also sends the message that they can get better and grow their ability to reach that higher level.

RESEARCH ON PRAISE SHOWS THAT MINDSETS AREN'T FIXED: THEY'RE BELIEFS THAT CAN CHANGE

We often try to motivate students by praising their intelligence and giving them labels such as “gifted and talented.” These labels are supposed to make them feel confident in their own abilities; however, these kinds of labels can actually undermine confidence by encouraging a fixed mindset. Instead, we should help students focus on the process of learning. When we show students that we value hard work and believe

in the power of effort through our words and actions, students will hear those messages and believe them.

Contrary to popular belief, motivation isn't something that students either have or don't have. What the praise research shows is that how adults interact with children every day is important, and can affect students' motivation in profound ways. More importantly, this research teaches us that we adults can change our own mindsets and interactions with students in ways that improve their motivation and, ultimately, their success in the classroom.

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This brief was edited by Lisa Quay, Managing Director of the Mindset Scholars Network, and David Yeager, Co-Chair of the Mindset Scholars Network.

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