

To praise or not to praise? That is the question!

A look at the impact of praise on children's well being



"Sweet words are like honey, a little may refresh, but too much gluts the stomach"

Anne Bradstreet

Introduction

Defining praise

Definition Praise:

'the expression of approval or admiration for someone or something'

(Oxford Dictionaries, n.d).

Resilience:

'(of a person or animal) able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions'

(Oxford Dictionaries, n.d)

Earlier research suggests that **praise** can benefit for children's **motivation** within educational settings, and can act as a **social reinforcer** for positive behaviours (Brophy, 1981; Delin & Baumeister, 1994). Yet research in the late 1980s and 1990s suggests that praise when deemed to be false by a child can hold a number of negative effects. For example, Meyer (1992) found that praise can have **paradoxical effects** on a child's perception of their own ability in the classroom. Hence the debate has arisen as to whether praise in children is a positive thing, or whether in fact it comes at the price of **resilience**.



'And that one I got for tidying my bedroom'

Dweck's research

Pioneering research by **Carol Dweck** introduced the idea that while some praise can be positive, other types of praise can be negative. Mueller and Dweck (1998) investigated the effects of different types of praise on children's mindsets in regards to intelligence. Praising a child's intellect leads children preferring easy tasks that require no effort, whilst praising children's efforts led to children selecting challenging tasks which offered them the opportunity to learn, hence increasing **motivation** and **resilience** which leads to higher achievement (Dweck, 2007).

Further research established that perceptions of other traits in addition to intelligence could be effected by differing types of praise. Specifically, praising traits (**person praise**) causes children to adopt a '**fixed mindset**', whilst praising a child's effort (**process praise**) produces a '**growth mindset**'. A child with a fixed mindset believes their traits are static and cannot change or develop over time. They are less **resilient** as they do not undertake difficult challenges through fear of failing. Whereas a child with a growth mindset believes that their traits can develop through hard work and persistence (Dweck 1999, 2007).

Person Praise: Praise of traits, e.g. *You are so clever*
Process Praise: Praise of effort, e.g. *You really tried hard in the puzzle*

Modern research

More recent empirical research has supported Dweck's theory, with a consistency across different tasks, age groups, and settings. Typical studies ask children to perform a task where half of the children are given person praise and the other half process praise. The findings consistently show that children given process praise display less helpless behaviour, exhibit heightened motivation, show mastery of behavioural tasks, and are generally **more resilient** (Cimpian et al, 2007; Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Zentall & Morris, 2010).

The most recent study (Brummelman et al, 2014 *see recommended reading*) suggests that praise has differing effects on **children's self-esteem**. This particular study compared the effects of **'inflated praise'**— giving exaggerated praise such as *'you made an incredibly beautiful drawing'*— to non-inflated praise, such as *'you made a nice drawing'*. They found that inflated praise, though often used with good intention, holds a negative effect on learning on children with a **low self-esteem**. This further extends Dweck's research by emphasizing that **praise may not be effective on all children**.

Real world applications

Dweck's research is strongly applicable within educational settings, for both typical children and children with a range of **disabilities** and/or **disorders** such as autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and emotional/behavioural disorder (EBD) (Bayat, 2010). However, recently some authors have tried to apply Dweck's work to parenting. Advice is given in many **parenting books** and articles about how and when to praise your child. For example, Alfie Kohn's book *'Punished By Rewards'*, which suggests praise from parents can lead to children becoming **'praise junkies'**. However this book and similar claims are not empirically established, as Dweck's work is specific to an educational setting.

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

History of topic

The Father of American Psychology himself, William James, first coined the term 'self-esteem' in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). James left us with the following definition: *"self-esteem = success/pretensions"*. In other words, our self-worth is determined by the amount of success we have, divided by how high our expectations are. James talked about the importance of helping young children develop a concept of "self". This is the first of many theories on the importance of developing children's **self-esteem** and **resilience**. Little work was undertaken on the topic for the next 70 years. Professor Martin Seligman (2007) insists this gap was largely due to economic depression and the world wars, as people had bigger problems to worry about than how they felt about themselves. However, he states how this changed during the 1960s; the birth of the **self-esteem movement**.

The movement was characterized by an increased amount of literature and research into the topic of self-esteem. The pioneers of this movement are often said to be Nathaniel Branden (1969) and Stanley Coopersmith (1967), as they took the importance of self-esteem to new heights. In Coopersmith's *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*, he states: *"Ability and academic performance are significantly associated with feelings of personal worth."* This is an example of the views that caught the attention of politicians and educators everywhere, and sparked the motivation to actively attempt to increase self-esteem in the classroom. An example would be how John Vasconcellos, a politician from California, created a **"Self-Esteem Task Force Team"**. He felt that *"raising self-esteem in young people would reduce crime, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, school underachievement and pollution."* Though his claims were never strongly supported, this exemplifies how important those involved in the movement saw self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2005). The self-esteem movement would eventually lead to research and claims on the benefits and consequences of using praise in the classroom.



Studies in the 60's suggested that using praise in the classroom increased academic achievement. Yet later on **Baumeister & colleagues** suggested that artificially boosting praise may lower subsequent performance and **reduce resilience**.

Studies that took place as early as the 1960s made claims that **using praise toward appropriate behavior as well as ignoring inappropriate behavior led to an overall increase in good behavior in the classroom** (Madsen, Becker, and Thomas, 1968). Studies by Hasazi and Haszai (1972) and Zimmerman and Zimmerman (1962) claimed that **positive reinforcement along with a lack of a negative consequence increased academic achievement**. Such views were the accepted as common sense in the academic community for many years. This was up until these views began being questioned by more modern figures of the self-esteem/praise world, such as Baumeister and Dweck. Work done by Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2005) claim that **artificially**

boosting self-esteem may lower subsequent performance. Dweck states how educators cannot hand students confidence on a silver platter. By praising a student for the sake of it, all you are doing to setting them up for failure. Research shows that praise for praise sake **will leave students less resilient in the face of adversity and more likely to give up** (Dweck 2007).

The study of increasing self-esteem and the benefits/consequences of praise has its roots based in the area of **social psychology**. The APA (American Psychological Association) defines social psychology as the branch of psychology that studies the effect of social variables on individual behavior, attitudes, perceptions, and motives. The social variables studied include the different types of reactions (e.g. praise) given by a teacher/parent and its effect on good behavior, academic achievement, motivation, view of self, etc.

Cultural and religious roots

Praise is thought to be a unique American-Anglo phenomenon, where middle class parents from both America and England would use praise with the purpose of raising their children to be adults who fit in well with society. The phrases 'good boy' and 'good girl' have been found to date back to the mid nineteenth century, reflecting values of the ancient group of English protestant Christians named the 'Puritans'. Such a group associated the bad behaviour of children with hellfire. However, later the American movement began to use praise as a way of celebrating children's achievements in the 1900's (Bayat, 2010).

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Cultural Connections

"Since the 1969 publication of The Psychology of Self-Esteem, in which Nathaniel Branden opined that self-esteem was the single most important facet of a person, the belief that one must do whatever he can to achieve positive self-esteem has become a movement with broad societal effects. Anything potentially damaging to kids' self-esteem was axed. Competitions were frowned upon. Soccer coaches stopped counting goals and handed out trophies to everyone. Teachers threw out their red pencils. Criticism was replaced with ubiquitous, even undeserved, praise"



The Me Me Me Generation

Much literature has come out in recent years about the consequences of the increased use of praise and the negative affect it has had on today's young adults and their culture. This generation, often referred to as "Millennials", is often labeled as being narcissistic and entitled. That may sound harsh, however there are statistics which support this argument. **58% more college students scored higher on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982 and 40% of "Millennials" believe they should be promoted every two years, regardless of performance.** Referring to the self-esteem movement, psychology professor Roy Baumeister says: "It was an honest mistake". **"The problem is that when people try to boost self-esteem, they accidentally boost narcissism instead"**, wrote Joel Stein in his Time Magazine article on Millennials. This generation is praise crazy, as 70% of them check their phone every hour. This is done to reduce anxiety and is a constant search for a quick psychological uplift through social approval from others (e.g. a text, someone liked your Facebook status). However, with this said, Stein (2013) suggests that this generation hasn't turned out to be so bad, being on average 'nicer' and more accepting of differences. That alone can outweigh a lot.

The "Most Praised Generation" and the Work Place

The recent surge of this "Culture of Praise" is changing the modern work place. CEOs and managers alike are beginning to realise that the young members of their teams need a different kind of attention than previous generations. In her article, "Coping with the culture of praise", Dr. Myrna Milani suggests that **those raised in this culture of praise need assurance that they are appreciated, or they will leave.** Big businesses have taken notice. The Wall Street Journal writes how corporations such as Bank of America and Lands' End are hiring people to train their managers on better ways to praise and compliment their employees. There is even a 1,000-employee company in Texas that has hired "assistants" to throw confetti at employees all day. This is all due to the fact that research suggests **"young adults feel insecure if they're not regularly complimented"** (Zaslow 2007). Psychologist Jean Twenge states how this generation is not good at appreciating and feeling good for others, **as this leads to poor working and intimate relationships.**

Overview

Toby McGuire are amongst celebrity advocates of a new trend in parenting, where you give children no praise and treat them like adults.

As time goes on, more and more psychologists are beginning to agree that all of this praise wasn't necessarily a good idea. Around 15,000 articles were written between 1970 and 2000 concerning the benefits of praise, which is strongly correlated with self-esteem and resilience. In 2003 the APA asked Roy Baumeister to compile a team of psychologists and review all of this literature for validity. **They found that only 200 out of 15,000 articles met their standards of scientific validity, and those 200 did not even show self-esteem to have an affect on academic or professional achievement** (Bronson 2010). As time goes on we will begin to see people go in the other direction, and begin to advocate not praising your children. There is even a new parenting trend, endorsed by

many celebrities such as Toby McGuire, in which **the basis is you treat your newborn baby like an adult and show them no praise whatsoever.** However, empirical research is needed to warrant such advice. Hopefully one day we can find a middle ground between over praising and not praising at all.

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Clinical applications

Educational applications

It is often suggested that the young people of today's society believe they do not need to work towards success, but instead expect success because of their natural talents; a consequence of the **false belief** that praising the intelligence of students develops their confidence and motivation to learn. A great deal of research has looked at thousands of children hoping to find the answers to why some children enjoy learning, even when learning is challenging, and why they are **resilient** when faced with barriers. In general, studies have aimed to maximize students' confidence in their capabilities and their satisfaction of learning by investigating the effects of praise.

The Effects of Praise

Person VS Process Praise

As mentioned earlier, Dweck's work is based upon the existence of two fundamental mindsets and looks at the effects of praising intelligence in

children as young as 4 years old and as old as adolescence, and in students from different backgrounds and ethnicities. Interestingly, their findings are consistently the same (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Cimpian et al, 2007): students praised for their intelligence experience a **brief** sense of pride, but this is immediately followed by **negative consequences** for students' achievement motivation. This can reduce their resilience meaning they are less likely to undertake challenging tasks in the future.

Person praise leads to a '**fixed mindset**', process praise leads to a '**growth mindset**'. Children with growth mindsets are more resilient.

In 1998, Mueller and Dweck had 5th grade students work on a task, and after the first set of problems the teacher either praised the child's intelligence (person praise) by saying '*you must be smart at these problems*' or praised the child's effort (process praise) by stating '*you must have worked hard at these problems*'. Students who received **person praise** indicated a **fixed** mindset (intelligence is innate), and preferred **easy** tasks which required no effort, and demonstrated a **decrease** in confidence in their abilities when they struggled on challenging tasks, despite the fact that the whole point of praise is to boost motivation and self-esteem. On the other hand, students who received **process praise** indicated a **growth** mindset (skills are gained because you work hard), and preferred **challenging** tasks so they could increase their learning. They remained, on the whole, **enthusiastic** and **confident** during challenging tasks. Praising ability over effort provides students not with motivation and **resilience** but a fixed mindset with all its vulnerability (Dweck, 2007). The video below is a visual representation in which Carol Dweck explains how children are exquisitely sensitive to what is going on in a situation; what other people value; and what they are being judged on through the impact of praise.

Carol Dweck: The Effect of Praise on Mindsets (http://www.youtube.com/v/TTXrV0_3UjY)

More recent studies have suggested that,

'...subtle differences in the genericness of language can influence children's conception of their abilities and their achievement motivation

- Cimpian et al (2007) pp. 316

That is, person praise is **generic**, indicating a stable trait of the child, while process praise is **non-generic**, focusing on one specific episode. By manipulating the genericness of the phrase, this would affect children's motivation. For instance, '*you are a good drawer*' (generic) compared to '*you did a good job drawing*' (non-generic). Such studies have showed that generic praise yields helpless behaviour whilst non-generic praise promotes mastery behaviours in students (Cimpian et al, 2007; Zentall & Morris, 2010).

Gender, Age & Praise

Whilst research suggests that different types of praise have different effects on students' motivation and resilience (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Zentall & Morris, 2010), previous research also suggests that age, gender, and culture can impact the way in which students respond to praise given (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). In one particular study (Corpus & Lepper, 2007), students received one of four types of feedback; process praise, person praise, neutral feedback e.g. a positive sounding 'OK' or product praise that focused on what students achieved e.g. 'What a wonderful painting'. What was found was that students aged between 4- and 5-years old demonstrated increased motivation after receiving any of the three types of praise. For girls aged between 9- and 11-years old, they showed **increased** motivation after receiving product praise and process praise, yet showed **decreased** motivation after receiving person praise. For boys of the same age, motivation was **not affected** by any of the three types of praise or neutral feedback. The authors demonstrated that students respond differently to types of praise given depending on their age and gender.

Although the studies above present a strong stance in the debate about the effect of praise on students' motivation and resilience, there are a few issues within such research. They are all **laboratory-based** studies with a focus on **short-term** affects and **teacher-child interactions** within **young children**. There is a lack of focus on real-life settings, long-term effects of praise, and parent-child interactions.

However, Gunderson et al (2013) were the first to study the impact of praise on children's motivational frameworks in a real-life setting. They showed that infants, aged between 1 to 3 years of age, whose **efforts** are praised become more motivated kids. In addition, it also plays a role in children's beliefs about themselves and their desire to take on challenges five years later. It was the first study to analyse parent praise in a **real-world setting**. Infants who received process praise were more likely to prefer challenges than those who received person praise, hence implying they are more resilient. Also, those who heard praise directed at actions were more likely to believe later on that abilities and behaviour could change and develop. Yet, the amount of praise didn't have an effect. It was also noted that parents praised the efforts of boys more than girls. Later, boys were more likely to try more challenging pursuits.

These studies demonstrate that in **children**, process praise leads to positive motivational outcomes whereas person praise can promote negative outcomes (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Zentall & Morris, 2010). Such findings have not been replicated with **adults**, but the one study with college students as participants found that person praise enhanced motivation more than process praise (Koestner et al, 1987). However the difference in results may be caused by artifacts between studies of children and adults. More recently, Haimovitz and Corpus (2011) examined the effect of praise in emerging adulthood by studying students aged between 18 to 25 years; particularly their reaction to person and process praise relative to no praise before and after experiencing failure. The authors found that students reported **more** intrinsic motivation and perceived competence after receiving **process** praise than person praise and a control condition. They extend findings with children to show that undergraduate students are more motivated by process praise than person praise when later faced with failure and students' reactions to praise change as they progress through college.

What can be taken from the above studies?

- **Process** praise seems to produce significant beneficial effects on students' motivation and **resilience** over person praise, potentially also in adults.

- **Gender** and **age** appear to affect the ways in which students respond to praise types
- Most research in the area of praise focuses on **teacher-child** interactions, with a lack of focus on parent-child interactions
- The **long-term** effects of praise, praise in **adults**, and **gender** differences in the effects of praise are widely under researched.

Future research should consider researching praise within students from different economic backgrounds as well as considering the implication of the development of motivation, resilience, and self-esteem across the years.

The Effects of Praise in Atypical Children

Individuals working with children with disorders or disabilities especially emphasize the value of praise as a 'social reinforcer'. Behavioural specialists and teachers who work with children with disorders/disabilities often employ a positive behavioural support (PBS) framework which can include hugs, high-fives and verbal praise as positive reinforcers for individual children (Bayat, 2010). PBS has a large body of empirical research from over the past 40 years.

Praise can be an effective social reinforcer for increasing appropriate and reducing problem behaviours in children with **special needs**, such as those with ADHD and autism.

Zimmerman & Zimmerman (1962) and other psychologists researching the development of atypical children have undertaken studies which strongly establishes the effectiveness of using praise and other positive reinforcements to **reduce** inappropriate behaviours, and to **increase** appropriate behaviours and specific motor and cognitive abilities relating to academic tasks. More recent studies have looked specifically at the effects of behaviour-specific praise (BSP) in students with emotional/behavioural disabilities (EBD; Allday et al, 2012), pervasive developmental disorders (PDD; Stevens et al, 2011), and autism (Polock et al, 2012) in comparison to general praise. BSP/descriptive praise has shown to increase both teaching efficiency and task engagement in students.

It is important for practitioners to understand the key developmental characteristics of each child to apply BSP, as well as understanding the issues relating to learning and motivation. Children who develop atypically may exhibit **learned helplessness**. Negative learning experiences in the past could potentially contribute to the lack of persistence or confidence in completing tasks that they are realistically capable of (Bayat, 2010). Excessive person praise may undermine intrinsic motivation in such children. However, process praise is a form of extrinsic motivation, which may enhance children's motivation and prevent learned helplessness.

Often children are diagnosed with autism, PDD, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) therefore using intervention strategies such as praise can be effective in preventing **problematic behaviours**. Ignoring problematic behaviour whilst applying appropriate praise can act as a positive social reinforcer, which improves social relationships (Bayat, 2010).

Interventions

Finding that process praise improves **motivation** and **resilience**, as well as leads to higher achievement, Dweck and her colleagues set out to design an intervention that would teach a growth mindset to students. They developed an eight-session workshop in which students learned study skills, time management techniques and memory strategies. In empirically testing their intervention, they found a significant improvement in the math grades of the growth mindset group, whereas a decline occurred in the control group (Blackwell et al, 2007).

Other researchers have found similar results with a growth mindset intervention in junior high school students (Good et al, 2003) and college students (Aronson et al, 2002).

Dweck and her colleagues wanted to facilitate the delivery of growth mindset workshops to students, so they developed an interactive computer-based version of the intervention called *Brainology*. Students work through six modules, learning about the brain, visiting virtual brain labs, doing virtual brain experiments, seeing how the brain changes with learning, and learning how they can make their brains work better (Blackwell et al, 2007). By clicking the image below it takes you to an example program of *Brainology* so you can experience for yourself what the students were presented in Dweck's study:



(<http://www.mindsetworks.com/s/brainology.aspx>)

Instructions to above site

Step One: Log on using the following details

- Username: brainology2014

- Password: glasgow2014

Step Two: Click on 'my brainology' on the right hand side of the screen

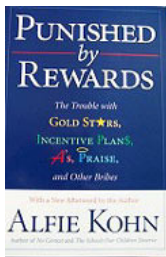
Step Three: Click launch brainology

*Note - if error occurs, try logging off then logging back on. Please be aware these log in details will last 14 days. They will be updated after 14 days so this application will be usable on the run up to the exam period.

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Wild uncritical claims

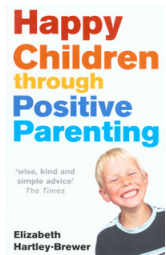
One particular area where advice on praise is given is in parenting literature. There are many books and articles written which offer parents advice on how, when and whether or not to give praise to children. Yet while many of these books make reference to Dweck's research, they often make claims which neither Dweck nor other scientists have found any empirical backing for. Some of these claims are discussed below.



Too much praise = bad

Punished by Rewards, Alfie Kohn

Alfie Kohn is a widely known humanistic parenting guru, and has published and sold many books claiming that too much praise is bad for children's achievement and motivation. He is firmly against behaviourism, and suggested in his article in parent's magazine (2000) that praising is a way for parents to manipulate children. In his book "Punished by rewards", he used Dweck's research into praise in school children work to back his claim that too much praise from parents can lead to children turning into 'praise junkies' when they are older (1999).

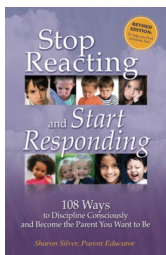


Praise can encourage children to become praise dependent

Happy Children through Positive Parenting, Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

Hartley-Brewer has authored parenting skills programmes, and has published four best-selling books on parenting in America. In addition, she has written several articles in many UK newspapers. In her book 'Happy children through positive parenting' (2005), she suggests:

"too much praise can not only diminish its value but also encourages children either to become praise-dependent – reliant on someone saying something is satisfactory before they can move onto the next task or project - or be reluctant to judge things for themselves" p. 109



Correct praise is the best way to increase children's self-esteem

How Praise can Hurt Kids, Sharon Silver

Silver is a best-selling author, and is the woman behind the website 'Proactiveparenting.net'. In her article "How Praise Can Hurt Kids" (2012), she states that:

"The best way for your child to achieve high self-esteem is for you to switch from global praise to specific praise."

She suggests that using too much praise can pressure children into conforming, and can make them need constant praise in the future.

However

- *Little research outside the classroom* – Dweck's research was mainly undertaken looking at teacher-pupil interactions, hence it is not particularly applicable to parent-child interactions as Kohn claims
- *Not all praise is bad* - Dweck's research doesn't imply that all praise is bad, it simply emphasises that too much 'person praise' may lead to children having a 'fixed mindset' about their own abilities. It specifically mentions that using 'process praise' can be positive (Dweck, 1986).
- *No evidence for 'praise junkies'* – Whilst many articles and books discuss how children who are praised too much may develop into 'praise junkies', there is no longitudinal evidence which looks at the longer term effects of praise on children. Hence it is entirely speculative to make the assumption that children will grow into adults who need continual praise.
- *Little evidence of the effect of praise on self-esteem* – To date, no published journal article has managed to establish that praise holds an effect on children's self-esteem. In fact, a large scale review of self-esteem studies by Baumeister & colleagues (2003) concluded that there was no proven link between giving praise and increasing self-esteem. Despite this, these parenting books and articles continue to make claims about how praise can damage self-esteem.

Gap between the theory, and the empirical result

Research spawning from Dweck's work has looked at the effects of praise on children in relation to whether they have a 'fixed' or 'flexible' mind set (Dweck, 1986). However, there are several areas which are under researched within the field. These include:

(1) Praise from parents

The majority of work by Dweck and colleagues looks at the effects of praise between a teacher and a pupil, or between an experimenter and a pupil in teaching environment. Yet many parenting guides instruct parents on how to praise their children. More research into parental praise would offer empirical backing for these claims.

(2) Individual differences

Some recent research has indicated that different children may respond to praise differently to praise. For example:

- *Age*: Corpus & Lepper (2007) investigated the effect of praise on both 4-5 year olds and 9-11 year olds. Making a broad comparison between the two groups, they noted that the younger children seem to be more affected by praise. Hence, future research examining the differing effects of praise on younger and older children would be beneficial.
- *Gender*: The Corpus & Lepper (2007) study also found that only girls were significantly affected by differing types of praise. There was no notable effect of differing praise on boys in the study of children aged 9-11. Hence, perhaps future studies could investigate whether praise research is more specific to young females.
- *Self-esteem*: Very recent research by Brummelman, Thomaes, de Castro, Geertjan Overbeek & Brad J. Bushman (2014) found that inflated praise had a negative effect only on children with a low self-esteem; children with a high self-esteem benefitted from praise. This is the only study to date which looks directly at the link between self-esteem and praise. Since many parenting books make claims that praise can negatively affect self-esteem, perhaps this is something that should be researched into more thoroughly in the future.

Different children respond to praise differently – for example **age, gender** and **self esteem** are known individual differences.

(3) The long term effects

Most of the research into the effects of praise looks at the short term effects. For example, by praising children then measuring their behaviour or their self-reports of their motivation immediately afterwards. Gunderson et al (2013) in a recent study looked at a correlation between praise and children's self-reported motivational frameworks 5 years later when they were aged 7-8. Yet they did not measure the children's actual behaviour. More longitudinal studies like this one are necessary to make any inferences about the long term effects of praise on children.

(4) Praise in natural settings

Most of the research undertaken looks at children in controlled laboratory school settings to see the effects of praise (Cimpian, Arce, Markman & Dweck, 2007; Corpus, Lepper & Lepper, 2007; Zentall & Morris, 2010). The Gunderson et al (2013) suggested their study was the first naturalistic one. More studies in natural settings, such as the child's home, are necessary to offer ecological validity to any theories regarding the use of praise.

(5) Cultural differences

Very little research has been undertaken in non-Western cultures. While Western cultures are individualistic, Eastern cultures tend to be more collectivist. Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch and Greenfield (2000) suggests that a key difference between the two cultures is that parent's in individualistic cultures often praise their child in an attempt to raise their self-esteem. Parents in collectivist cultures whereas often criticise to ensure their children act normally. Hence, looking at the effects of praise in different cultures may obtain very different results.

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Moral Criticisms

Suissa (2013), a philosopher of education, suggests that using praise instrumentally does not aid children's moral development. She suggests that when we use 'process praise', we are often withholding our natural 'reactive attitudes'. We instead are acting 'objectively' with a goal of modifying a child's behaviour. She goes on to say:

"(praise), by reducing parent-child interaction to questions of effectiveness, have the effect of blinding parents to their own experience of their children; blinding them, too, to the moral significance of endeavouring to live with children as part of what it means to live in a social world"

p 12

While she suggests that withholding natural reactions at times is a positive thing, she advises that by doing so all the time, the parent is dehumanising the child. By acting naturally in front of a child, for example saying 'you're great' when a child does something they like, they are not acting with the intention to control the child. They are simply expressing their own moral views about what the child has done. Suissa suggests praising naturally as opposed to instrumentally treats the child as an agent of their own free will, in addition to morally educating them.

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Practical exercise

Why is praise important?

Praise lets children know that who they are and/or what they do pleases you. It helps children develop positive self-worth. Because there are mainly two types of praise, person and process, there are different ways to express such praise.

What you can say to give process praise

'Thank you for cleaning up'

'You worked really hard on that project'

'You did a great job washing the dishes'

What you can say to give person praise

'I love you'

'I'm so glad you are my daughter'

'You are so special'

Be careful though! **BOTH** types of praise are important, but it is important they are not used together. Instead of saying: 'Daddy really loves you for cooperating with me' say: 'Daddy really loves you'. Then add: 'I really like it when you cooperate with me'. The first statement tells the child that daddy only loves him at certain times, whereas the second statement is person praise. The final statement is healthy process praise.

Reward What You Want Repeated

A reward is something positive to do for your child when they behave the way you want. Praise is one of the most powerful ways to reward a child. When you see your child succeed or do something you like, LET THEM KNOW!

Steps to Using Praise

- Focus your attention on the child and the situation—praise deserves your total attention.
- Move close to the child
- Make eye contact with the child on the child's level
- Gently touch the child—this is a positive form of communication
- Smile
- Praise your child for being or for doing

Praising without Pushing

As children grow and develop they will try new things for example, sport teams, a musical instrument. They will need praise as they explore their new talents. Just be careful that the praise does not turn into **pressure!**

How To Praise A Child's Effort

'You've been practicing that jump shot every day for weeks. I'm very proud'

'I'm really pleased to see you try so hard'

Having reasonable expectations is key. The child may have decided that their new activity is not for them, which is OK! By trying something new the child has learned more about themselves.

Power Stories

A power story is a summary of all the great things a child did or attempted to do in a day. At bedtime, you could tell this story and tell the child all the wonderful things they did that day.

For example,

'Today, Jess woke up and brushed her teeth all by herself. She worked really hard at nursery and played well with all the other children. Jess was angry when she could not play in the sandbox, but she didn't scream or shout. Instead, she played on the swings. Great job Jess! I love you.'

Praise in Classrooms

The power of praise in changing student behaviour is that it both indicates teacher approval and informs the student about how the praised academic performance conforms to teacher expectations (Burnett, 2001). As with any potential classroom reinforcer, praise has the ability to improve student academic performance—but only if the **student** finds it reinforcing (Akin-Little et al, 2004). Some ways to shape praise to increase its effectiveness include

- **describing noteworthy student behaviour**
- **praise effort and accomplishment, not ability**
- **match the method of praise delivery to student preferences**

Teachers can use praise to boost students' **effort, accuracy, or fluency**. Or the teacher may instead single out the student's **work product** and

use praise to underscore how similar the product matches the goal set by the student. Below are examples of praise statements that could be used for the specific student goals:

Praising Effort (Daly et al, 2007):

'Today in class, you wrote non-stop through the entire writing period. I appreciate your hard work'

Praising Accuracy(Haring et al, 1978):

'This week you were able to correctly define 15 of 20 biology terms. That is up from 8 last week. Terrific progress!'

Praising Fluency (Haring et al, 1978):

'You were able to compute 36 correct digits in two minutes on today's math time drill worksheet. That's 4 digits more than earlier this week—impressive!'

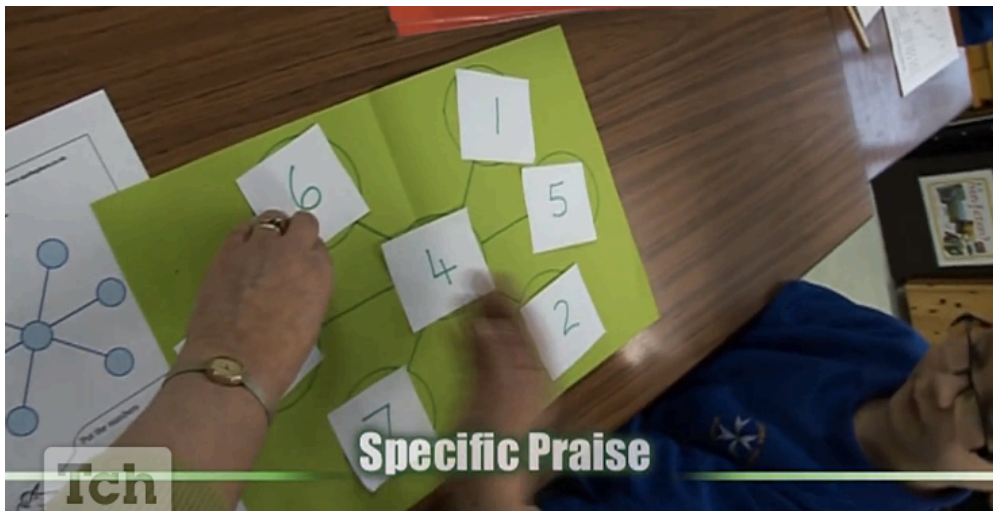
Praising Student-Goal Setting:

'At the start of the class, you set the goal of completing an outline for your paper. And I can see that the outline you produced today looks great. It is well-structured and organized'.

Praising using external standard:

'On this task, I can see that you successfully converted the original fractions to equivalent fractions before you subtracted. Congratulations you just showed mastery of our math standards!'

This video gives a visual representation of using praise in a classroom setting. Click on the image below to see the video.



(<https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/positive-feedback-to-students>)

feedback-to-students)

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Conclusion

To conclude, we offer our own interpretations of how our topic, praise vs. resilience, fits in with key exam themes. We illustrate a few chosen themes below with a past exam paper question.

Focusing on the Positive/ rebalancing

Should Positive psychology be about rebalancing, or about pushing towards the more "positive"? Is there never any merit in reminding ourselves of those who don't have enough to eat, did not grow up in a loving family? Why is this not recommended and practised? Should we push ourselves and others always towards more positive emotions, more exercise, etc. without limit? Should this be warned against?

We suggest that praise vs resilience is a good example of an area within positive psychology where pushing others to more positive emotions is not always a good thing for well-being. Dweck's research has demonstrated that praise, as a method of increasing a child's self-esteem, is not always effective. Using person praise on a child, that is praise aimed at the child's traits, can actually reduce their resilience within learning by decreasing their motivation and increasing helpless behaviours (see Dweck's research in *clinical application section*). Furthermore, a recent study by Brummelman and colleagues (2014 *see recommended reading*) demonstrated that using inflated praise on children with low self-esteem, that is overly exaggerated praise such as 'that is an incredibly good drawing', actually holds a negative effect on children. Instead, the research suggests that careful use of process praise – that is praise of a child's efforts - is what should be aimed for.

Hence, this is a topic in positive psychology where it is important to balance, as opposed to being exclusively positive.

Rebranding of religious practice

To what extent is positive psychology just a translation / relabeling of ancient religious and cultural practices?

We suggest that praise vs resilience is an example of a topic in positive psychology which does have some cultural roots, yet offers a very different approach to ancient religious and cultural practices. Ancient Christian practice emphasised the use of the terms 'good boy' and 'good girl', and related the bad behaviour of children to hellfire. The American movement later used praise as a way of celebrating the accomplishments of their children (See Bayat 2010 *recommended reading*). However, the praise vs resilience debate emphasises that praise does not always hold a positive effect, and that only specific types of praise increase a child's motivation and resilience. On the contrary, using phrases such as 'good boy' is what Dweck (see Dweck's research in *clinical application section*) describes as 'person praise', a type of praise which actually increases a child's helpless behaviour within school. The advice given about praise today within education is entirely different to the advice previously given by ancient religious and cultural practices.

Hence, we suggest that praise vs. resilience offers a strong example of a positive psychology topic which is clearly not merely a translation or relabeling of ancient and religious practices.

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Key Reference

If you are going to read one paper, we suggest that you read:

Dweck, C. S. (2007). The Perils and Promises of Praise. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 34-39.

This paper summarises Dweck's research into the effects of person and process praise on a child's mindset. It is easy to read, and gets the major points across. You can find this paper by clicking here (<http://maryschmidt.pbworks.com/f/Perils+of+Praise-Dweck.pdf>).

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Recommended Reading

Praise in special education

Bayat, M. (2010). Clarifying issues regarding the use of praise with young children. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 31(2), 121-128.

This paper offers an overview on the use of praise in an educational setting, with a particular emphasis on its application on children with special needs. It offers a practical application of how to praise children. Click here (<http://tec.sagepub.com/content/31/2/121.full.pdf>) to access the paper.

Praise and self esteem

Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2005). Exploding the self-esteem myth. *Scientific American*, 292(1), 84-91.

This paper refutes the popular claims made during the self esteem era about the correlation between self esteem and praise, in addition to a number of other aspects. Click here (http://www.castonline.ilstu.edu/walsh/Research%20Methods/Baumeister_2005%20-%20self%20esteem.pdf) to access the paper.

A modern paper

Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., de Castro, B. O., Overbeek, G., & Bushman, B. J. (2014). "That's Not Just Beautiful—That's Incredibly Beautiful!" The Adverse Impact of Inflated Praise on Children With Low Self-Esteem. *Psychological science*, 0956797613514251.

This is a very recent 2014 paper, which finds that children with high and low self esteem may respond differently to praise, in particular 'inflated' praise. Click here (<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/01/15/0956797613514251.full.pdf+html>) to access the paper.

[Click here to return to top of page](#)

Reference List

History of the Topic

Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2005). EXPLODING THE SELF-ESTEEM MYTH. *Scientific American*, 292(1), 84-91.

Coopersmith, Stanley. *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1967. Print.

Dweck, C. S. (2007). The Perils and Promises of Praise. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 34-39.

Hasazi, Joseph E., and Susan E. Hasazi. "Effects of Teacher attention on digit-reversal behavior in an elementary school child." *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 5.2 (1972): 157-62. Web.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications, 1950. Print.

Madsen, C. H., Becker, W. C., & Thomas, D. R. (1968). Rules, praise, and ignoring: Elements of elementary classroom control. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 1, 139-150.

Seligman, Martin E. P., Karen Reivich, Lisa Jaycox, and Jane Gillham. *The Optimistic Child*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. Print.

Zimmerman, E. H., & Zimmerman, J. (1962). The alteration of behavior in an elementary classroom. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 5, 50-60.

Cultural Connections

Bronson, Po, and Ashley Merryman. *Nurtureshock: Why Everything We Thought about Children Is Wrong*. London: Ebury, 2010. Print.

"Celeb Parenting Trend Has No Room for Toys." *Parent24*. N.p., n.d. Web. <http://www.parent24.com/Toddler_1-2/care_nutrition/Celeb-parenting-trend-has-no-room-

for-toys-20140114>. (http://www.parent24.com/Toddler_1-2/care_nutrition/Celeb-parenting-trend-has-no-room-for-toys-20140114)

Milani, Myrna. "Coping with the Culture of Praise." *Canadian Veterinary Medical Association* 48.10 (2007): 1077-080. Web.

Stein, Joel. "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation." *Time Magazine* 20 May 2013

Zaslow, Jeffery. "The Most-Praised Generation Goes to Work." *The Wall Street Journal* 20 Apr. 2007: Web.

Clinical Applications

Akin-Little, K. A., Eckert, T. L., Lovett, B. J., & Little, S. G. (2004). Extrinsic reinforcement in the classroom: Bribery or best practice. *School Psychology Review*, 33, 344-362

Allday, R. A., Hinkson-Lee, K., Hudson, T., Neilsen-Gatti, S., Kleinke, A., & Russel, C. S. (2012). Training General Educators to Increase Behavior-Specific Praise: Effects on Students with EBD. *Behavioral Disorders*, 37(2), 87-98.

Aronson, J., Fried, C. B., & Good, C. (2002). Reducing the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students by shaping theories of intelligence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 38(2), 113-125.

Bayat, M. (2011). Clarifying issues regarding the use of praise with young children. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 31(2), 121-128.

Blackwell, L. S., Trzesniewski, K. H., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Implicit theories of intelligence predict achievement across an adolescent transition: A longitudinal study and an intervention. *Child development*, 78(1), 246-263.

Burnett, P. C. (2001). Elementary students' preferences for teacher praise. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 36(1), 16-23.

Cimpian, A., Arce, H. M. C., Markman, E. M., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Subtle linguistic cues affect children's motivation. *Psychological Science*, 18(4), 314-316.

Corpus, J., & Lepper, M. R. (2007). The effects of person versus performance praise on children's motivation: Gender and age as moderating factors. *Educational psychology*, 27(4), 487-508.

Daly, E. J., Martens, B. K., Barnett, D., Witt, J. C., & Olson, S. C. (2007). Varying intervention delivery in response to intervention: Confronting and resolving challenges with measurement, instruction, and intensity. *School Psychology Review*, 36, 562-581.

Dweck, C. S. (2007). The perils and promises of praise.

Good, C., Aronson, J., & Inzlicht, M. (2003). Improving adolescents' standardized test performance: An intervention to reduce the effects of stereotype threat. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 24(6), 645-662.

Gunderson, E. A., Gripshover, S. J., Romero, C., Dweck, C. S., Goldin-Meadow, S., & Levine, S. C. (2013). Parent Praise to 1-to 3-Year-Olds Predicts Children's Motivational Frameworks 5 Years Later. *Child development*.

Haimovitz, K., & Corpus, J. H. Effects of Person versus Process Praise on Motivation in Emerging Adulthood. *Psychology*, 42, 350-365.

Haring, N.G., Lovitt, T.C., Eaton, M.D., & Hansen, C.L. (1978). *The fourth R: Research in the classroom*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.

Henderlong, J. & Lepper, M.R. (2002) The effects of praise on children's intrinsic motivation: A review and synthesis in *Psychological Bulletin*, 128 774-795

Kamins, M. & Dweck, C.S. (1999). Person vs. process praise and criticism: Implications for contingent self-worth and coping. *Developmental Psychology*.

Koestner, R., Zuckerman, M. & Koestner, J. (1987). Praise, involvement, and intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 383-390.

Mueller, C.M. & Dweck, C.S. (1998). Intelligence praise can undermine motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75 33-52.

Polick, A. S., Carr, J. E., & Hanney, N. M. (2012). A comparison of general and descriptive praise in teaching intraverbal behavior to children with autism. *Journal of applied behavior analysis*, 45(3), 593.

Stevens, C., Sidener, T. M., Reeve, S. A., & Sidener, D. W. (2011). Effects of behavior-specific and general praise, on acquisition of tacts in children with pervasive developmental disorders. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5(1), 666-669.

Zentall, S. R., & Morris, B. J. (2010). "Good job, you're so smart": The effects of inconsistency of praise type on young children's motivation. *Journal of experimental child psychology*, 107(2), 155-163.

Zimmerman, E.H., & Zimmerman, J. (1962). The alteration of behavior in an elementary classroom. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 5, 50-60.

Wild Uncritical Claims

Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does High Self-Esteem Cause Better Performance, Interpersonal Success, Happiness, Or Healthier Lifestyles?. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(1), 1-44.

Brewer, E. (2005). *Happy children through positive parenting* (1 ed.). London: Vermilion.

Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American psychologist*, 41(10), 1040.

Kohn, A. (2001). Five Reasons to Stop Saying "Good Job!". Five Reasons to Stop Saying "Good Job!". Retrieved January 30, 2014, from <http://www.alfiekohn.org/parenting/gj.htm> (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/parenting/gj.htm>)

Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards: the trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co..

Silver, S. (2012, June 29). How Praise Can Hurt Kids. Proactive Parenting RSS. Retrieved January 31, 2014, from <http://proactiveparenting.net/articles/how-praise-can-hurt-kids> (<http://proactiveparenting.net/articles/how-praise-can-hurt-kids>)

Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., de Castro, B. O., Overbeek, G., & Bushman, B. J. (2014) "That's Not Just Beautiful, That's Incredibly Beautiful!" The Adverse Impact of Inflated Praise on Children With Low Self-Esteem. *Psychological Science*, 25(1). Retrieved January 30, 2014, from <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/01/15/0956797613514251.full.pdf+html> (<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/01/15/0956797613514251.full.pdf+html>)

Cimpian, A., Arce, H. C., Markman, E. M., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Subtle Linguistic Cues Affect Children's Motivation. *Psychological Science*, 18(4), 314-316. Retrieved January 29, 2014, from the Sage Publications database.

Corpus, H., Lepper, J., & Lepper, M. R. (2007). The Effects of Person Versus Performance Praise on Children's Motivation: Gender and age as moderating factors.

Educational Psychology, 27(4), 487-508. Retrieved January 29, 2014, from the Taylor and Francis database.

Corpus, J. H., & Lepper, M. R. (2007). The Effects Of Person Versus Performance Praise On Children's Motivation: Gender And Age As Moderating Factors. *Educational Psychology, 27*(4), 487-508.

Gunderson, E. A., Gripshover, S. J., Romero, C., Dweck, C. S., Goldin-Meadow, S., & Levine, S. C. (2013). Parent Praise to 1-to 3-Year-Olds Predicts Children's Motivational Frameworks 5 Years Later. *Child Development, 84*(5), 1526-1541.

Zentall, S. R., & Morris, B. J. (2010). "Good Job, You're So Smart": The Effects Of Inconsistency Of Praise Type On Young Children's Motivation. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 107*(2), 155-163. Retrieved January 25, 2014, from the Science Direct database.

Moral Criticisms

Suissa, J. (2013). Tiger mothers and praise junkies; children, praise, and the reactive attitudes. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 47*(1), 1-19.

Practical Exercises

The Power of Praise. *Family Times*. Supplement provided by New Mexico State University. Available at http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/family_times/family_times.pdf (http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/family_times/family_times.pdf) . Accessed on 4th February 2014.

[Click hereto return to top of page](#)