

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Jenny Brockis

Why praise can be a double-edged sword

The way we praise our children, even from a very early age, can have a lasting impact. When done effectively, it can really promote resilience.

It seemed to come out of nowhere. One day we had a happy, confident, thriving daughter who was doing really well at school and the next she was alternating between a quiet sullenness and loud arguments, telling us, "I just don't care".

The problem appeared to lie with her maths. She had previously found maths quite easy, and had got good enough marks to be put up into the higher level with the 'smart' kids. The result: a very unhappy daughter and a significant slump (aka tailspin) in her performance.

Putting on our best parental hats, we tried to work out what was going on. Our daughter's response to our gentle probing was "I should never have been put into the smart kids' class because I'm dumb" and "My teacher just thinks I'm not "trying".

Kids (and adults!) learn best when feeling confident and motivated to do well, even when the work is hard. The trouble is that in many instances our education system is set up to reward cleverness or smartness before effort. Those who excel in learning and passing exams often enjoy an elevated status and are held up as the example for others to emulate. There is much less recognition for effort alone.

The problem with this is that it potentially damages the confidence and self-belief of some children around their abilities.

As parents it is natural to want to see our children do well. When we see our kids reaching those first milestones, we marvel and celebrate their brilliance. It turns out those words we use in praising our kids at the age of one to three years will determine the mindset and desire for challenge that shows itself five years later, when they start school. This can even affect the way we think about ourselves right into adulthood.

When we praise intelligence – "You are so smart", "Aren't you clever!" – we are using language that suggests that these are the traits that we value the most, and that make our children different from others.

In contrast, when we praise effort – "I can see you tried hard with that", "Well done for doing all that work" – we are rewarding progress and intrinsic motivation. That promotes a 'growth' or 'possibility' mindset.

Unfortunately for our daughter, somewhere along the line she had come to believe that she was only doing well if she consistently got 'A'. Being put in a class designed to stretch her capability resulted in the opposite occurring as she was no longer achieving those high scores. She now felt a failure and, not liking to be made to feel stupid, had decided it wasn't worth giving the harder work a try.

What she needed was more of a growth mindset. Helping our children to develop a 'growth' versus 'fixed' mindset is what makes the biggest difference in determining our their level of self-confidence, resilience and motivation. Professor Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset*, describes how by choosing to develop a growth mindset we can start to learn from our mistakes, and feel we are succeeding when we master a new skill or piece of learning that has been challenging or difficult.

Our mindset is not something we are born with, it is formed and shaped through experience, and who we hang out with. We used to think that intelligence was innate, a 'fixed' quality, and we now know that is simply not true.

Tips for encouraging a growth mindset:

- 1 Look at learning as a way to stretch and grow the brain. Learning new things is great exercise for seeing new possibilities or ways of doing things. It encourages imagination and creative thinking.
- 2 When congratulating your child, use words that praise the outcome that has resulted from their putting in the work and effort.

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- 3 When things go wrong, ask, "What could you do differently next time to get a better result?" Failure and making mistakes is normal. Learning to deal with them effectively helps build resilience.
- 4 Use the power of "Yet". If your child tells you, "I'm no good at..." or "I can't do that", your response could be, "You're just not there ... yet". This implies that it is work in progress and success may come through perseverance. It's not about false hope, but encouragement.

Other research is now uncovering additional benefits from adopting a growth mindset. It can:

- encourage a student to want to stay at school longer
- facilitate transition to university
- diminish bullying or aggressive behaviour
- develop resilience in the face of adversity
- help see challenge as opportunity
- develop tenacity in persevering to overcome obstacles
- help see effort as the route to mastery
- build the ability to use criticism as something to learn from
- promote inspiration and new learning from sharing in the success of others.

We all want our children to do well and one of the best ways we can help is to promote a growth mindset so they become more positive in their outlook as to their own capabilities, broaden their perspective of the world and elevate their resourcefulness.

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