The praise paradox

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The Praise Paradox: When and Why Praise Backfires in Children With Low Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT—In contemporary Western society, many adults use praise to boost children’s self-esteem. Accordingly, they might praise those who seem to need it the most: children with low self-esteem. In this article, we review research showing that certain types of praise can backfire, especially in children with low self-esteem. Adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem person praise (e.g., “You’re smart!”) and inflated praise (e.g., “That’s incredibly beautiful!”). Paradoxically, such praise can lower these children’s motivation and feelings of self-worth in the face of setbacks (e.g., when they struggle or fail). Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, might invite more person praise and inflated praise from adults, creating a self-sustaining downward spiral. We propose a transactional model to shed light on this apparent praise paradox, and we describe the model’s implications for theory and research.

KEYWORDS—praise; self-esteem; transactional

When twelve-year-old Linda arrived at the third level of her videogame, her father exclaimed, “You’re great! You have perfect coordination! You’re an expert player.” Linda lost interest and walked away. Her father’s praise made it difficult for her to continue because she said to herself, “Dad thinks I’m a great player, but I’m no expert. I made the third level by luck. If I try again, I may not even make the second level. It is better to quit while I’m ahead.” (1, p. 37)

Western society believes strongly in the power of praise, especially to support children with low self-esteem. At this very moment, probably thousands of parents, teachers, and educators are praising children with low self-esteem, using person praise (e.g., “You’re great!”) and inflated praise (e.g., “You have perfect coordination!”). However, emerging research shows that these types of praise can backfire in children with low self-esteem. In this article, we shed light on this apparent praise paradox. We define praise, propose a transactional model to understand the praise paradox, and identify directions for research.

DEFINING PRAISE

Praise refers to explicit verbal positive evaluations of another person’s products, actions, or traits, where the evaluations are based on the evaluator’s subjective standards (2). This definition highlights three key features of praise. First, praise consists of positive evaluations that are stated explicitly (e.g., “You made a great painting!”) rather than implicitly (e.g., “I’ll put your painting on the fridge!”), and conveyed verbally (i.e., written or spoken) rather than nonverbally (e.g., thumbs-up). Second, praise focuses on another person’s—not one’s own—products (e.g., a painting), actions (e.g., the act of painting), or traits (e.g., having a skill for painting). Third, praise is based on the evaluator’s subjective standards. Evaluations based on objective standards, such as standardized test scores, are not considered praise.
TRANSACTIONAL MODEL

According to research, praise can enhance and undermine children’s motivation and feelings of self-worth, depending on how the praise is phrased (3–5). Praise has been studied primarily as a unidirectional process, with adults’ praise shaping children’s outcomes. Yet over the past decades, the shaping of children by socializing agents has come to be understood as part of a transactional process (for an overview, see 6). Children are not mere recipients of socialization, but their characteristics shape the socialization they receive, which in turn shapes them (7, 8). Sometimes children elicit socialization practices that reduce deviant outcomes (e.g., children’s poor grades can lead their parents to provide unsolicited homework assistance, which raises grades; 9). At other times, children elicit socialization practices that amplify deviant outcomes (e.g., children’s aggression can make their parents lenient, which inadvertently reinforces aggression; 10). Within this transactional perspective, adults and children are seen as mutually shaping one another. Building on this principle, we propose a transactional model of praise. Extending previous theories of praise, our model does not focus solely on how praise affects the child, but on transactions between the praiser (adult) and the individual being praised (child).

According to our transactional model of praise (see Figure 1), when children have low self-esteem, adults consider this a problem and use praise to “cure” the problem. Thus, children are not mere recipients of praise, but their low self-esteem elicits praise from adults. Unfortunately, adults often use forms of praise—person praise and inflated praise—that backfire in children with low self-esteem. Conventional wisdom tells adults that these forms of praise benefit children with low self-esteem. Yet rather than raising self-esteem, such praise backfires in the face of setbacks, lowering these children’s motivation and feelings of self-worth. Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, further motivate adults to raise children’s self-esteem by offering more praise, establishing a self-sustaining downward spiral. As such, adults’ unsuccessful attempts to cure children’s low self-esteem by praising them can become self-sustaining, and lower children’s motivation and feelings of self-worth over time. In what follows, we outline each step of our model and provide empirical evidence.

Adults’ Desire to Boost Self-Esteem
Western adults view low self-esteem in children as a problem (11) and are motivated to cure it through praise. Praise is widely seen as a cure for low self-esteem. Interventions to boost self-esteem rely on praise as one of their key components (12). Also, self-help books and websites state that “one of the most common and effective ways to build children’s self-esteem is to praise them” (13, para. 23), and that whenever a child feels bad, “find his good points and praise him and he will feel good about himself” (14, p. 3). Adults have internalized these messages: 87% of parents believe that children need praise in order to feel good about themselves (15).

Praise comes in different forms and doses, varying in focus and extremity. Focus refers to whether praise is directed at personal qualities (e.g., “You’re so smart!”) or the process through which success was achieved (e.g., “You worked so hard!”; 16). Extremity refers to whether praise conveys an overly positive, inflated evaluation (e.g., “You made an incredibly beautiful drawing!”) or a less positive, noninflated evaluation (e.g., “You made a beautiful drawing!”; 17). Driven by the desire to cure low self-esteem, many adults use person praise and inflated praise.

Person Praise
One might think that praising children’s personal qualities would automatically boost their self-esteem. Therefore, adults might be inclined to give person praise to children with low self-esteem. In one study, parents read scenarios involving children with either high or low self-esteem—such as: “Sarah is often happy [unhappy] with herself. She has just made a drawing” (18)—then wrote down the praise they would give. Parents gave children with low self-esteem more person praise (30%) than they gave children with high self-esteem (14%). By contrast, they gave children with low self-esteem somewhat less process praise.

When children are praised for their personal qualities, such as their intelligence or worth, they may believe these qualities are something they either have or do not have—a fixed mindset (3). Children thus become concerned with how smart or worthy they are, seeking tasks that will prove these qualities and avoiding those that disprove them. When children then encounter setbacks, they may attribute them to lack of smartness or worth, and therefore give up and feel down about themselves. Land-

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**Figure 1.** Transactional model of praise. When children have low self-esteem, adults are motivated to raise their self-esteem through person praise and inflated praise. But such praise leads these children to pursue self-validation goals, which lower motivation and feelings of self-worth in the face of setbacks. Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, further motivate adults to raise children’s self-esteem, establishing a downward spiral.
In summary, to support children with low self-esteem, adults often give them person praise and inflated praise. But instead of raising self-esteem, such praise leads these children to pursue self-validation goals, which can backfire in the face of setbacks, and leads to lower motivation and feelings of self-worth. Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, further motivate adults to raise self-esteem by praising children, thus establishing a self-sustaining downward spiral.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

To understand praise, researchers should examine not only how praise affects children, but also how children's characteristics, such as their self-esteem, elicit praise from others. That is,
researchers should adopt a transactional perspective that recognizes children’s role in shaping their own socialization experiences (6). This perspective sheds light on the moment-by-moment transactions between the praiser and the individual being praised, as well as on the longer-term effects of praise. Longitudinal research shows that parents’ praise can shape children’s views of themselves over months or even years (21, 22). Yet the mechanisms through which praise exerts long-term effects are unknown. Praise may not remain accessible in children’s minds for long. Rather, it may set in motion a transactional process, with adults’ well-intentioned praise lowering children’s motivation and feelings of self-worth, which in turn encourages adults to give even more person praise and inflated praise. These effects are self-sustaining and may therefore compound over time.

Our model also provides a window into why many adults continue to believe in the benign nature of person praise and inflated praise. When adults give such praise, children’s initial response is most likely positive—smiling, sitting upright, and looking confident (32). This initial positive response might reinforce adults’ use of these types of praise. However, the same instance of praise might backfire later, when children struggle with a difficult task or fail. Adults might not recognize these harmful effects as a result of praise because these effects are counterintuitive and can occur long after the praise has been given. Thus, although the positive effects of person praise and inflated praise seem obvious, their harmful effects fly under the radar.

Our model adds to research showing that well-intended and seemingly benign socialization practices can backfire (33). One such practice is conditional regard: making affection and appreciation contingent on children’s achievements. Although often believed to spark children’s motivation, conditional regard conveys to children that they are worthy when they succeed, but worthless when they fail. This may put stifling pressure on children to excel, and thus undermine their intrinsic motivation (34). Again, what seems like common sense can lead adults to rely on socialization practices that have unintended consequences.

LOOKING AHEAD

Our review of the literature identifies promising directions for research. One direction is to investigate praise across developmental phases. Research on praise has focused primarily on late childhood, when children can form self-esteem and readily use praise to evaluate themselves and to set standards for their performance (35). Yet praise can be consequential from an earlier age. Younger children, even preschoolers, already have a sense of their “goodness” or “badness” that can be shaped by praise (16, 36). Researchers should examine whether praise is more consequential during some phases of development than others.

Researchers should also examine cross-cultural differences in the use of praise. Praise seems to be used scarcely by parents from non-Western, collectivistic countries such as China (5). Indeed, Chinese parents place less emphasis on children’s successes (e.g., praise less) and more emphasis on their failures (e.g., criticize more) than do their American counterparts (37), possibly because they attach less value to children’s self-esteem (38). Yet little is known about how types of praise, such as person praise and inflated praise, are used differently across cultures.

Researchers should also identify why some adults do not fall prey to the praise paradox. Perhaps these adults do not see low self-esteem as a problem and therefore refrain from praising children (11). However, it is more likely that they do see low self-esteem as a problem but do not try to cure it by giving person praise and inflated praise. They might rely on more adaptive forms of praise, such as process praise (e.g., “You worked so hard!”) and noninflated praise (e.g., “You made a beautiful drawing!”). Also, they might not attempt to raise self-esteem directly by lavishing children with praise, but do so indirectly by helping children master difficult new tasks (39) and building supportive relationships with them (40).

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to raise children’s self-esteem, adults often use types of praise that paradoxically backfire. As psychologist and educator Haim Ginott aptly noted, “there are rules and cautions that govern the handling of potent medicines—rules about timing and dosage, cautions about possible allergic reactions. There are similar regulations about the administration of emotional medicine” (1, p. 32). By proposing a model to understand paradoxical effects of praise, we hope to give researchers and practitioners a framework to guide their inquiries into praise.

REFERENCES


