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The delicate art of raising children's self-esteem

Development

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Reinforcing the three pillars of healthy self-esteem at home and at school



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In the 1960s, Western society began to embrace self-esteem as a critical foundation of children's development. Although certainly not a panacea, self-esteem – a feeling of self-worth – [brings modest benefits](#) to children's well-being, social relationships, and academic performance. If children feel worthy for who they are, they are better able to deal with the challenges life throws at them.

“Praise is necessary. It is a must...”

Unsurprisingly, then, parents and teachers are committed to raising children's self-esteem. A common belief is that one can raise children's self-esteem by lavishing them with praise. In fact, [many believe](#) that children need praise to feel good about themselves – just as plants need water and sunlight to grow. Many would agree with an [American mother who told](#) researchers: “Praise is necessary. It is a must... You cannot build up a child's self-esteem without telling them continuously about the good things that they're doing...”

“If children feel worthy for who they are, they are better able to deal with the challenges life throws at them.”

Despite widespread belief in the benefits of praise, [decades of empirical research](#) show that praise is not invariably beneficial. Of course, children enjoy receiving praise when practicing a new skill, because it tells them what they are doing well. But in other cases, praise may not work as intended. As educator [Alfie Kohn says](#), “The most notable feature of a positive judgment isn't that it's positive, but that it's a judgment.”

In the book [Between Parent and Child](#), we read about 12-year-old Linda, who was praised by her father when she reached the third level of her video game. “You're great,” he said, “you have perfect coordination! You're an expert player.” She immediately lost interest in playing the game, thinking, “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.”

Praise can backfire

[In our research, my colleagues and I](#) have put these ideas to the test. We've shown that when parents and teachers seek to raise children's self-esteem, they often dole out *person praise*, which is about children's personal qualities – “You're so smart!” – and *inflated praise*, which is overly positive – “You did *incredibly* well!”

“My colleagues and I have identified three pillars of healthy self-esteem, which can be reinforced at home and at school.”

Although well intentioned, these types of praise can backfire. When children receive person praise, they may become [concerned about appearing smart to others](#). This may lead them to seek out easy tasks, which allow them to demonstrate that they're smart, and avoid challenging tasks, which might show that they aren't so smart after all. They may [cheat to get ahead](#). And when they struggle, they may [doubt their ability and give up](#). Similarly, when children receive inflated praise, they may initially feel proud and elated: “Maybe I *am* incredible!” But over time, they may worry about not being able to live up to the praise. As they struggle or face setbacks, they may feel that they're falling short of expectations and [develop low self-esteem](#). A teacher told me about a boy in her class who had been lavished with praise at home for his drawing. One day, [the boy said](#): “I'm not an amazing drawer... My mom tells me I am, but I know others are better than me.”

Pillars of healthy self-esteem

How, then, can parents and teachers raise children's self-esteem in a healthy and effective way? Based on research in developmental psychology and educational science, my colleagues and I have identified [three pillars of healthy self-esteem](#), which can be reinforced at home and at school:

- **Growth:** Children have an intrinsic desire for self-improvement. [Helping them reflect on how much they've improved over time](#) can raise their self-esteem, boost their desire for learning, and give them a sense of progress and insight.
- **Realism:** To hone their skills and develop their self-esteem, children need realistic feedback on their performance, effort, and strategies. Especially when children are really good at something, they may [benefit more from constructive criticism than from indiscriminate praise](#). When giving constructive criticism, we need to [set high standards and show that we believe that children are capable of meeting those standards](#).
- **Robustness:** When children fail or make mistakes, they often worry that others won't accept or value them anymore. By [conveying to children that we accept and value them unconditionally](#), we can cultivate a robust sense of worth that does not crumble in the face of setbacks. When children fall short, we should not question their ability by saying, for example, “[It's ok – not everyone can be good at math](#).” Instead, we should continue to express our confidence in their potential for learning and frame their failure as [an opportunity for learning](#).

“Before praising a child, we should take a step back and think carefully about the message we're sending.”

A delicate art

When we want children to feel happy with themselves, our reflex is to dole out praise. But praise might not be the most effective way to raise self-esteem. Before praising a child, we should take a step back and think carefully about the message we're sending. Do we want children to be concerned about our assessment of them? Or do we want them to become intrinsically curious learners who seek out challenges and persist in the face of setbacks?