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DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PRAISE

Sander Thomaes and Patty Leijten

From the first stages of life, children are often positively evaluated, or praised, by other people. In fact, even from well before they are able to grasp the contents of what others say, many children are frequently exposed to phrases such as “look at you, you’re so cute!” Such positive evaluations remain common when children grow up—such as in school, where they are frequently praised for their performances or efforts.

Praise can be a powerful tool for parents, educators, therapists, and others to influence young people’s development. Still little is known, though, about how the consequences of praise may depend on age. Does a simple phrase such as “good job!” have similar consequences for an infant who just managed to stand upright for the first time, a kindergartener who comes back home from the first school day, a 9-year-old who just gave a talk in class, or a teenager who just finished her first driving lesson? And do apparently subtle differences in type of praise—i.e., how praise is phrased—affect children of different ages differentially? The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of current knowledge of developmental differences in the consequences of praise for young people’s adjustment and list priorities for future work.

Infancy

One may wonder whether praise can have any effects on infants, who are not yet able to truly understand verbal content. Research suggests that—in some contexts and for some behaviors—it can. For example, one study found that 10-month-old infants are more likely to imitate the play behaviors modeled by their mothers when they are praised for doing so (e.g., “way to go, baby”; Poulson & Kymissis, 1988). Similarly, research has found that 12- to 20-month-old infants engage more in modeled vocalizations, accept more bites in feeding

episodes, and (especially younger infants) show more helping behaviors, when they are praised or verbally encouraged (Dahl et al., 2017; Dearden et al., 2009; Poulson, Kymissis, Reeve, Andreatos, & Reeve, 1991).

These studies illustrate how praise does not necessarily require understanding of verbal content on the receiver's part to be consequential. Infants discriminate and process the intonation or vocal affect of praise, or the facial expressions or postural changes that go along with it, which can then impact their behavior. In one particularly insightful study (Fernald, 1993), 5-month-old American infants were exposed to praise (i.e., the equivalents of “you’re so good”) versus disapproval (the equivalents of “you’re so naughty”) in several languages that were unfamiliar to them. This way, the researcher insured that children would not understand any of its content. Infants showed positive affect, as indexed by their smiling, when they heard praise in German and Italian (i.e., affectively expressive languages), but not Japanese (i.e., a less affectively expressive language). Thus, from at least as young as 5 months of age, infants can process praise from its affective tone.

Early childhood

Somewhat later in development, in early childhood—a time of exploration and rapidly increasing verbal understanding—praise can shape children’s learning behavior. For example, research has found that praise provides an effective strategy for preschool teachers to help socialize effective learning behavior in their pupils. One study (Fullerton, Conroy, & Correa, 2009) showed that when preschool teachers are trained to use *labeled* praise in their classrooms—praise that makes explicit what behavior a child is praised for (“Good job washing your hands,” also called *specific* praise)—2- to 4-year-old children show increased compliance (i.e., observed adherence to teacher instruction) and engagement (i.e., observed appropriate participation or interaction) in class. Importantly, all participants in this study had been identified by their teachers as showing problem behaviors that interfered with classroom engagement: Teacher praise can benefit the behavior of preschoolers who particularly need it.

Furthermore, from the time when children have developed a rudimentary verbal understanding, it already matters *how* praise is phrased. Sometimes, even apparently subtle differences in how praise is phrased matter. Consider the distinction between generic praise and nongeneric praise (Gelman & Heyman, 1999). Generic praise implies that a particular behavior that a child is praised for stems from an inherent and stable trait or skill; by contrast, nongeneric praise implies situation specificity of the behavior. In one study (Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007), 4-year-olds who had initial success on a drawing task (that they enacted with a hand puppet) were either told, “You’re a good drawer” (i.e., generic praise) or “You did a good job drawing” (nongeneric praise). When they subsequently received criticism on the task, those who had received generic praise reacted more negatively—they denigrated their skill and disengaged from

the task. Presumably, they inferred from the generic praise that their performance on the task signals their inherent ability. When they received criticism, they took this to imply that they lacked ability, and they felt and behaved accordingly.

Another study (Zhao, Heyman, Chen, & Lee, 2017), involving 3- to 5-year-olds, found that generic praise impacts children's moral behavior and can promote cheating. In the first stages of a guessing game, children were either told "You are so smart" (i.e., generic praise) or "You did very well this time" (i.e., nongeneric praise). Children who had received generic praise were more likely to cheat later on in the game—they were observed to peek more, even if they had promised not to do so, when the experimenter left the room. They likely did so in an attempt to maintain their reputation for being smart. Together, results such as these illustrate how, already from young age, apparently small differences in how praise is phrased may actually be psychologically salient and meaningful, and influence children's learning and achievement behaviors accordingly.

Middle and late childhood

One significant change as children move from early into middle childhood is that individual differences in social adjustment (e.g., the quality of relations with peers) become increasingly stable and consequential (Nelson, Rubin, & Fox, 2005). Research suggests that teachers can influence children's social adjustment at school by creating socially safe school environments—and it is their use of praise that can play a major role in this process. For example, in one study (Spilt, Leflot, Onghena, & Colpin, 2016), second graders (i.e., mostly 7-year-olds) from 30 Belgian classrooms took part in a teacher-mediated preventive intervention, called the *Good Behavior Game*. The intervention seeks to broadly promote pupils' positive social and on-task behavior through teachers' behavior management. The intervention led to increases in the frequency with which teachers praised pupils for positive, compliant behavior. This increase in teacher praise, in turn, drove decreases in pupils' preferences to be alone and avoid contact with peers—as assessed from the beginning to the end of the school year, according to both teachers and children themselves. Thus, by adequately praising their pupils, teachers can help foster a social climate in their classrooms that helps withdrawn children improve relationships with peers.

Similarly, when parents are trained to use praise when interacting with their children, this can help to promote child compliance and reduce child disruptive behavior. In one experiment (Leijten, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Dishion, & Matthyss, 2016), parents of children (mostly 4- to 8-year-olds) who were at risk for disruptive behavior problems were first requested to praise their child (or not) for compliant behavior. Next, parents asked their children to clean up a game that they were playing with. Children who had been praised were subsequently more compliant and needed less time to finish the cleaning-up. Next, these same parents were trained to use praise in their day-to-day interaction with their child for a two-week period. By the end of the period, they reported reductions in

their children's disruptive behavior (as compared to baseline), more than did parents who were not trained to use praise.

Children's responsiveness to how praise is phrased, which originates in early childhood, continues in middle and late childhood. For example, primary school-aged children who receive generic, ability-focused praise (also called *person* praise, e.g., "you're so smart") tend to show helpless responses in the face of challenge or setbacks. They shy away from challenge or give up easily, and when confronted with failure or criticism, they may engage in self-blame or experience shame. Children who receive nongeneric, effort-focused, or strategy-focused praise (also called *process* praise, e.g., "you worked so hard") are less likely to show such helpless responses (Brummelman, Thomaes, Overbeek et al., 2014; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). What is more, the consequences of praise in school-aged children depend on whether or not praise involves social comparison (e.g., "You did better than other kids!"; Corpus, Ogle, & Love-Geiger, 2006), is inflated (contains an adverb or adjective that magnifies its positivity, e.g., "You're *extremely* good"; Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2014), or is perceived to be inaccurate (Lee, Kim, Kesebir, & Han, 2017).

Importantly, research in middle and late childhood also shows that the type of praise that adults use may depend on child characteristics—in particular, children's level of self-esteem (or at least, adults' *estimation* of children's level of self-esteem). In one series of studies, parents read scenarios involving children with high self-esteem versus low self-esteem who performed some act (e.g., played the piano), and they wrote down how they would praise the child. Parents gave more generic (i.e., *person*) and inflated praise to children with high (vs. low) self-esteem (Brummelman, Thomaes, Overbeek et al., 2014; Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro et al., 2014). Similarly, in an observational study, parents administered mathematics problems to their own children. They were observed to give more inflated praise to the extent that their children had lower self-esteem (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro et al., 2014).

This tendency for parents to attune their praise to their children's level of self-esteem makes intuitive sense—parents may think that praise that directly contradicts children's habitual self-views may help them overcome their insecurities. Unfortunately, the consequences of such intuitive (i.e., generic and inflated) praise for children with low self-esteem are not what one would hope. They trigger in children with low self-esteem a tendency to validate their worth as a person—to prove they are as competent and worthy as the praise that they receive suggests they are. As a consequence, they tend to avoid challenge and feel down on themselves in the face of failure (Brummelman, Crocker, & Bushman, 2016).

Adolescence and emerging adulthood

Around the time children enter adolescence, their perceptions of praise—and thus, the potential consequences of praise—tend to change. For example,

compared to younger children, adolescents are more likely to believe that the praise that they receive from others is reflective of how those others perceive their ability (Meyer, 1992; Möller, 2005).

This development is consequential, especially with regard to the consequences of effort praise. Throughout childhood, effort praise facilitates intrinsic motivation by instilling in children the belief that effort improves ability. In adolescence, however, effort praise can actually *compromise* motivation (Amemiya & Wang, 2018). Why is this the case? As compared to younger children, adolescents increasingly come to believe that effort and ability are inversely related (a belief that is common among adults as well; Barker & Graham, 1987). This belief holds that, for example, smart people do not need to work hard, and vice versa, that is, working hard implies that one may not be smart. For adolescents, receiving effort praise may therefore implicitly convey the message that they lack ability (or at least, that the person providing praise thinks they do). In a study that addressed this explanation (Lam, Yim, & Ng, 2008), it was shown that effort praise (i.e., praise for invested effort) is indeed less motivating to adolescents to the extent that they have more firmly adopted the belief that effort and ability are inversely related. Moreover, when the researchers experimentally made salient the “inverse relation” belief (i.e., by having participants read an article that endorsed this idea), effort praise hampered their task perseverance.

In secondary school, teachers tend to place more emphasis on students’ performance as compared to their learning trajectory (Eccles & Roeser, 2013; Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995). This may be one factor contributing to adolescents’ belief that effort and ability are inversely related: Adolescents notice that teachers approach high- and low-achieving students differently, and tend to praise lower achieving students for effort in an attempt to encourage them (Butler, 1994). For adolescents, effort praise may therefore come with the connotation of low ability.

Unfortunately, still relatively little is known about the consequences of praise beyond adolescence. That said, a few interesting studies have been timed in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. This work, which involved college students as participants, has shown that praise continues to have motivational potential in academic and performance settings. For example, one study found that college students who, throughout a course, were verbally praised by their professor for the time they had spent on their homework, performed better at the final course examination, and also reported more motivation to learn than those who were not praised (Hancock, 2002).

There is some debate as to whether the potential undermining impact of effort praise found in adolescents continues into emerging adulthood. One experiment suggested that this might be the case (Koestner, Zuckerman, & Koestner, 1987). College students who worked on a series of puzzles and received effort praise experienced less intrinsic motivation and chose less challenging puzzles to work on than did those who received person praise—in some cases even less than those who received no praise at all. Later research, however, showed that (depending on students’ level of seniority) effort praise actually can enhance college students’

intrinsic task motivation, but such effects specifically surfaced in the face of a failure experience (Haimovitz & Henderlong Corpus, 2011). The psychological impact of effort praise in older youth and young adults is complex, and its motivational benefits seem less straightforward than in children.

Research priorities

The most direct, and arguably most informative, approach to investigate whether and how the consequences of praise may depend on children's age is longitudinal. As it stands, our understanding of age dependencies in the consequences of praise is limited to comparisons of studies that use somewhat similar designs across different age groups. A more precise understanding could be gained from longitudinal research that assesses the child outcomes associated with praise (e.g., parents' or teachers' habits in praising children) across development. For example, such research could establish more conclusively at what age children begin to perceive and be responsive to how praise is phrased; at what age children's behavior and learning outcomes are most potently shaped by praise; and at what age adolescents come to conceive of (effort) praise as potentially signaling low ability.

To be sure, some longitudinal work into the consequences of praise does exist. For example, research has found that the tendency for parents to spontaneously praise their young children (14–38 months) for effort foretells relevant child outcomes years later: When children were ages 7–8, those who received more praise for effort at young age were more likely to view intelligence as a malleable trait (Gunderson et al., 2013). Again 1–2 years later, these children performed better in mathematics and reading comprehension, an effect that was driven by the belief that intelligence is malleable (Gunderson et al., 2018). Notwithstanding these longitudinal findings, a priority for future work is to help understand whether, how, and why the consequences of praise change over the course of development.

A second priority for future work will be to better understand cultural differences in the consequences of praise. Cultural context shapes how adults communicate with children about their desirable behavior, ability, successes, and failures (Fu & Markus, 2014; Ng, Pomerantz, Lam, 2007; Wang, Wiley, & Chiu, 2008). For example, there are cultural differences in the extent to which adults' praise primarily serves to foster children's independence (i.e., their feelings of autonomy and competence, by meeting performance standards) versus their interdependence (i.e., their feelings of relatedness, by meeting the desires and expectations of others; Wang et al., 2008). Accordingly, the consequences of praise (and different types of praise, such as the types discussed in this chapter) for child adjustment are likely to differ across culture.

It is unfortunate, then, that our current understanding of praise and its consequences stems mostly from research in Western (i.e., North American, European) samples; generalization to youth growing up in other cultures is problematic. A priority for future work is to build an understanding of the consequences of

praise that is not only developmentally but also culturally informed—an understanding of how the consequences of praise may vary both over the course of development and across culture.

Coda

From young age, receiving praise is psychologically powerful. Indeed, praise can be a potent source of young people's motivation, learning, well-being, and behavioral adjustment. And yet, in some cases, praise can have unintended, more disadvantageous consequences as well, such as when it pressures receivers to live up to high expectations. This chapter has reviewed the developmental psychology of praise: current knowledge of how the consequences of praise—and different *types* of praise—may vary across age, from infancy into emerging adulthood. Throughout development, young people care about being praised, but how they construe and react to being praised differs substantially across age.

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