

## 7. Paradoxical effects of praise: A transactional model

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## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

### **Abstract**

In Western societies, parents and teachers often use praise in an attempt to increase children's self-esteem and motivation. In fact, praise has become the most common type of feedback that children receive in their everyday lives, at least in many Western societies. However, there is a growing body of research showing that praise may sometimes have unintended consequences. Rather than increasing self-esteem and motivation, some forms of praise can make children concerned about upholding the positive evaluation they have received. In some cases, these concerns may lead children to avoid challenges, to give up or cheat when they struggle, or to feel bad about themselves in the face of setbacks. This lowered self-esteem and motivation may, in turn, encourage parents and teachers to provide even more praise, thus establishing a vicious cycle. We propose a transactional model to shed light on these paradoxical effects of praise, and we discuss research directions to validate the model.

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

Modern parents and teachers often feel responsible for their children's self-esteem and motivation. While they are not wrong that their words and actions are consequential, their ideas about how to instill self-esteem and motivation may sometimes be misguided. In the past few decades, much of the burden of instilling self-esteem and motivation has been placed on the practice of praising children. Indeed, it seems quite intuitive that saying positive things about children—about what they have done and what their qualities are—would make them feel good about themselves and would motivate them to take on challenges and persist in the face of setbacks.

This belief in the power of praise has spread through Western society. Self-help books state, "Be generous with your praise. Find as many opportunities to sincerely praise your children as you can" (McKay, 1992, p. 243). Posters, such as "101 Ways to Praise a Child," provide parents and teachers with inspiration for how to praise, ranging from "Good," "Well done," and "Nice work" to "Excellent," "Outstanding," and "You're spectacular." Parenting and educational interventions often use praise as their core component and, in fact, praise can often be effective (O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006). Unsurprisingly, then, many Western adults use praise to boost children's self-esteem and to make them feel confident about their abilities (Miller & Cho, 2018). However, research is suggesting that these well-intentioned efforts are not always successful. In this chapter, we will examine *when* and *why* praise may sometimes instead undermine children's self-esteem and motivation. In doing so, we will propose a transactional model to shed light on these paradoxical effects of praise.

### **Transactional Model**

To date, praise has primarily been studied as a unidirectional process, with children being shaped by adults' praise (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). Yet, every evaluative event is a transaction between the people involved. In this view, children are not mere recipients of

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

praise; they may draw praise from others, which may, in turn, shape them. In recent years, researchers have developed models to understand these transactions involving praise (Brummelman, Crocker, & Bushman, 2016; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). These models do not focus exclusively on how children are being shaped by adults' praise, but on transactions between the praiser (the adult) and the praisee (the child). They describe how such transactions may arise out of adults' well-intentioned attempts to increase children's self-esteem (Brummelman et al., 2016) and motivation (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). Here, we bridge these models to provide a transactional model of praise that addresses both self-esteem and motivation.

According to our model (Figure 1), especially in Western societies, adults' lay theories typically hold that praise is an effective way of raising children's self-esteem and motivation (step 1). In order to accomplish this desired outcome, adults may be especially inclined to give *person praise*, such as "You're so smart!" or *inflated praise*, such as "You did incredibly well!" (step 2). These forms of praise—while often quite pleasant in the moment—may, in some cases, inadvertently jeopardize self-esteem and motivation in the longer run, as they may make children concerned about upholding the positive evaluation, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. This concern can make children vulnerable to future challenges or setbacks, both actual and feared (step 3). A child's lowered self-esteem or motivation may, in turn, further motivate adults to offer praise, establishing an undesirable cycle (step 4). We will discuss each of these steps in detail.

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

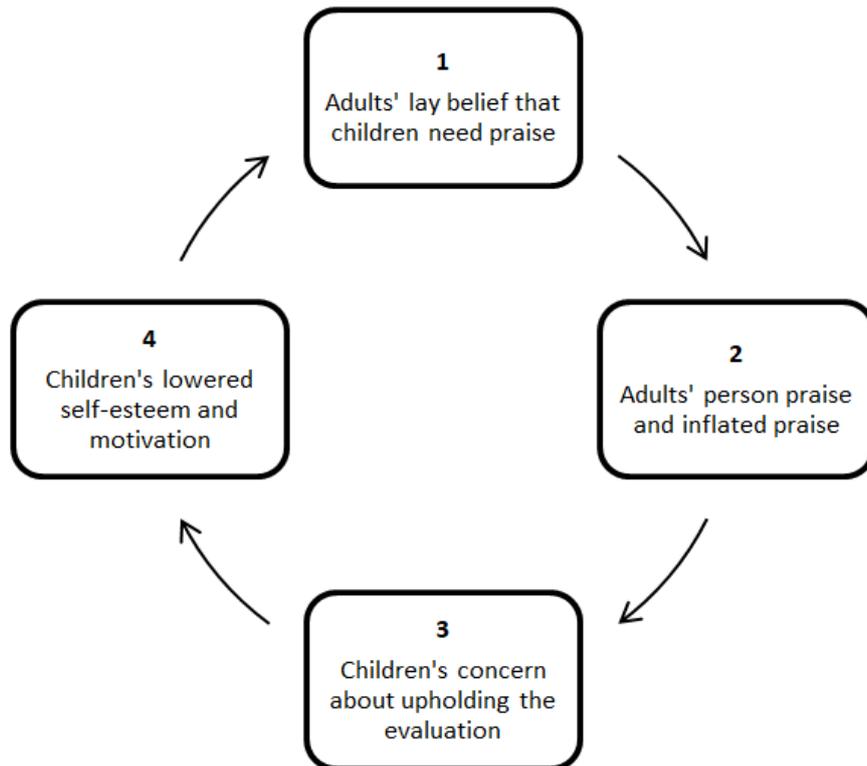


Figure 1. Hypothesized transactional model of praise.

### Step 1: Why do Adults Praise?

Most parents and teachers want what is best for their children, and many believe, correctly, that they play a key role in supporting the child's self-esteem and motivation. In addition to this general stance, there may also be particular events that signal to parents and teachers that this would be a good time to play that supportive role. One such example may be when the child has had a success. At these times, it may seem almost obligatory to offer praise.

Socialization practices, including praise, may be driven by adults' *lay theories* (also known as *implicit theories*, *naïve theories*, *ethnotheories*, or *folk theories*). Lay theories reflect the core beliefs that people have about themselves and others, and they can guide

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

information processing and decision making (Plaks, Levy, & Dweck, 2009). Among such lay theories are those that adults hold about childrearing. Many Western adults believe that self-esteem is key to children's motivation and that self-esteem can be raised effectively through praise (Miller & Cho, 2018). In fact, most Western adults believe that children need praise to feel satisfied with themselves (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2011) and to be confident about their abilities (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Such culture-specific beliefs may translate into concrete parenting behaviors. Compared to their non-Western counterparts, Western adults are more likely to praise children for their successes (Ng, Pomerantz, & Lam, 2007). Thus, lay theories may inspire adults to bestow praise on children.

### **Step 2: How do Adults Praise?**

Praise can vary in its focus and its extremity. In terms of focus, praise can be directed at the child's personal qualities (*person praise*, e.g., "You're really smart at this") or the process through which the child achieved success (*process praise*, e.g., "You found a good way to do it"; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; see also Mueller & Dweck, 1998). In terms of extremity, praise can contain an extremely positive, even inflated, evaluation (*inflated praise*, e.g., "You did *incredibly* well") or a more modest, but still positive evaluation (*modest praise*, e.g., "You did well"; Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2014). Whether praise is inflated depends on its wording; inflated praise contains an adverb (e.g., *extremely*, *incredibly*) or adjective (e.g., *amazing*, *fantastic*) signaling a very positive evaluation.

When attempting to increase self-esteem or motivation, adults may be especially inclined to give person praise and inflated praise, as both are designed to make children feel as though they have high ability. Moreover, adults may be most likely to give such praise to children who seem to need it the most: those with low self-esteem, who do not have high

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

appraisals of themselves or their ability to begin with. In a series of studies (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro et al., 2014; Brummelman, Thomaes, Overbeek et al., 2014), adults read scenarios involving children with high or low self-esteem (e.g., “Sarah is often unhappy with herself”), and then wrote down the praise they would give. Adults gave children with low self-esteem more person praise and more inflated praise than they gave children with high self-esteem.

### **Step 3: How do Children Respond to Adults’ Praise?**

Praise does more than just make children feel good in the moment. It can shape their understanding of themselves and their transactions with the world. Children are active meaning makers who readily use messages from their significant others, often their parents and teachers, to construct mental representations of themselves in relation to others and in relation to the tasks they perform in the world (Dweck, 2017). Praise may give children answers to such questions as: What does the adult think of me? What does the adult think caused my success? What does the adult expect from me in the future? What will the adult think of me if I don’t do well in the future?

**Person praise.** When children are praised for their personal qualities (such as their intelligence) after a success, they may see the adult as telling them that their ability itself caused their success—not their particular strategies or efforts (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). They may also infer that the intelligence they are said to have is something important to adults and something that makes them special. As a result, children may become more concerned with how smart they are, and they may seek tasks that continue to prove their smartness and avoid tasks that could disprove it to themselves or others. When children later struggle or fail, they may attribute this to a *lack* of smartness, making them give up and feel down about themselves and their ability.

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

By contrast, when children are praised for the process they engaged in to bring about success (such as their effort or strategies), they may infer that future success or future ability development can be achieved by engaging in these processes (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Consequently, children may become eager to take on challenges to improve themselves. When they struggle or fail, they may not attribute this to lack of smartness; rather, they may infer that they did not try hard enough or that they used suboptimal strategies, and may therefore be more likely to persist and improve.

A series of experimental studies have tested the effects of person and process praise (e.g., Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007; Haimovitz & Corpus, 2011; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Skipper & Douglas, 2012; Zentall & Morris, 2012). In one series of studies (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), children succeeded on a task: “You got [number of problems] right. That’s a really high score.” Immediately after, children received person praise (e.g., “You must be smart at these problems”), process praise (e.g., “You must have worked hard at these problems”), or no praise. Children who received person praise not only endorsed more of a fixed mind-set (seeing intelligence as more fixed) but also were more likely to avoid challenges, and to later lie about the number of problems they had solved correctly. Moreover, when they encountered a period of failure, they were more likely to denigrate their ability and to perform more poorly— and, later, to lie about the number of problems they had solved correctly. By contrast, children who received process praise not only endorsed more of a growth mind-set (viewing intelligence as something that could be developed) but also were more likely to embrace challenges and to be honest about their performance when it was poor. Moreover, when they failed, they were less likely to denigrate their ability; instead, they were more likely to persist and to perform well.

It seems that person praise, unlike process praise, makes children concerned about appearing smart. Consistent with this idea, in an experiment with 3- and 5-year-old children

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

(Zhao, Heyman, Chen, & Lee, 2017), those who received person praise from the experimenter—“You are so smart!”—were more likely to cheat in a card-guessing game, probably in an attempt to uphold their reputation for being smart.

Longitudinal studies suggest that person and process praise may have long-term consequences in real-world settings. In one study (Pomerantz & Kempner, 2013), mothers completed a 10-day daily interview, reporting how often they gave their child person and process praise. Children who received more person praise were more likely to endorse a fixed mind-set and to avoid challenges 6 months later. In another study (Gunderson et al., 2018), parental praise was observed at home when children were 1, 2, or 3 years old. Children who received more process praise were more likely to endorse a growth mind-set 5 years later and, in turn, to achieve better math and reading scores 2 years after that in elementary school. Such motivational effects of process praise can already manifest at 18 months of age, when children comprehend process-focused words such as “try.” In two observational studies (Lucca, Horton, & Sommerville, 2019), 18-month-old infants who received more process praise from their parents were more likely to persist at challenging tasks (e.g., engaging in a difficult stacking task).

**Inflated praise.** Like person praise, inflated praise may be intended to make children feel good and may sometimes do so. However, when children are praised in inflated ways, they may also feel pressure to live up to the implied expectations of them. Indeed, it has been argued that praise can convey an implicit demand for continued exceptional performance (Baumeister, Hutton, & Cairns, 1990; Ryan, 1982). When children are told that they performed incredibly well, they may infer that they should perform incredibly well all the time to keep the adult’s high regard. Children, perhaps especially those who doubt their ability or are preoccupied with others’ opinions of them, may then be afraid of not being able

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

to live up to these standards. Everyone's life is full of struggles and setbacks, so children may eventually fall short of the standards set for them and feel down about themselves.

A series of experiments tested the effects of inflated praise. In one study (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro et al., 2014), children were asked to make a drawing, and their drawing was then shown to a professional painter. The painter gave them inflated praise ("You made an *incredibly* beautiful drawing!"), modest praise ("You made a beautiful drawing!"), or no praise. Children with low self-esteem who received inflated praise avoided subsequent challenging tasks, perhaps because they were afraid of not being able to live up to the standards set for them. In another study (Nikolić, Brummelman, Colonesi, de Vente, & Bögels, 2018), children were invited to sing a song on stage, and their performance was evaluated by a professional singer. The singer gave children inflated praise ("You sang *incredibly* well!"), modest praise ("You sang well!"), or no praise. Socially anxious children who received inflated praise were likely to blush—often a hallmark of embarrassment, which may arise when children feel put on the spot to deserve or live up to the praise (Drummond & Su, 2012). Thus, inflated praise can make at-risk children concerned about living up to other people's expectations of them, potentially leading them to avoid challenges. Unlike inflated praise, modest praise did not have such effects; it led children with low self-esteem to embrace challenges, and did not cause socially anxious children to blush.

Even more directly relevant, in an observational-longitudinal study (Brummelman, Nelemans, Thomaes, & Orobio de Castro, 2017), parental praise was observed at home when children were ages 7-11. About 25% of all praise was inflated, and parents were more likely to give inflated praise to children with low self-esteem. However, the more inflated praise parents gave, the lower the children's self-esteem was 6, 12, and 18 months later—regardless of whether children started out with high or low self-esteem. That is, parents who respond to

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

their children with inflated praise may inadvertently contribute to lower self-esteem in children over time (also see Lee, Kim, Kesebir, & Han, 2017).

In sum, although they are given with good intentions, person praise and inflated praise do not seem effective tools to raise or sustain children's self-confidence, challenge-seeking, and task persistence. Both forms of praise seem to make children focused on judgments of the self—judgments rendered by themselves or by others. The ability to see oneself as an object of judgment develops in early childhood (Burhans & Dweck, 1995). As we have noted, when children are praised for their personal abilities or in inflated ways, they may become concerned with upholding the positive evaluation. Especially in the face of setbacks, those who have received such praise may feel that they have to sacrifice learning and self-improvement for the sake of demonstrating their worth or ability—for example, by avoiding challenges, lying about their performance, or even cheating for purposes of “improving” their performance.

### **Step 4: How do Children's Responses to Praise Affect Adults?**

One might wonder: If person praise and inflated praise seem to backfire, why do adults continue to provide such praise? When adults give praise, children's initial response may most often be positive. From this initial response, adults may legitimately infer that children enjoy being praised, which fosters their continued use of praise. Person praise and inflated praise may backfire only later, after the initial flush of pleasure, and may do so particularly when children face challenges or setbacks. Adults may not recognize that these later effects can be consequences of the same pleasure-producing praise, because these effects run counter to their lay theories and may occur long after the praise has been delivered. In fact, as we have seen, children's lowered self-esteem and motivation may even motivate adults to continue to praise.

### Summary and Future Directions

According to our model, then, adults hold lay theories that may encourage them to provide children with praise—including person praise and inflated praise—in an attempt to increase their self-esteem and motivation. However, these forms of praise can make children concerned about upholding the positive evaluation in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. In some cases, these concerns may lead children to avoid challenges, to give up or cheat when they struggle, and to feel bad about themselves in the face of setbacks. This lowered self-esteem and motivation may, in turn, encourage parents and teachers to provide even more praise, thus establishing a vicious cycle.

Several parts of our model deserve more research. First, our model assumes that adults' praise is driven by their lay theories about child-rearing, which hold that praise is key to children's self-esteem and motivation. These beliefs are historically situated and culturally specific; around the 1970s, they became a touchstone of Western child-rearing (Miller & Cho, 2018). What makes these beliefs appealing to Western parents and teachers? Can these beliefs explain why praise is more common in Western than in non-Western child-rearing? And could targeting these beliefs change the way parents and teachers praise children? We need more research to address these questions.

Second, our model suggests that some children may be more susceptible to the detrimental effects of praise than are others. We need more research to identify such individual differences. For example, are there children who gain motivation from extravagant praise and perform well, but who labor under great anxiety lest their performance fall and they are proven unworthy? In such cases, the praise may have seemed to work, but perhaps at great cost to children's well-being. These may not be children with low self-esteem but rather with high but "contingent" self-esteem.

## PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PRAISE

Third, our model identifies ways to avoid adverse effects of praise. Some experts have suggested that parents and teachers should stop praising children altogether (Kohn, 2001). Yet it seems almost impossible for parents and teachers not to praise, and there are conditions under which praise can convey useful information about the utility of effort or strategies in learning. Instead, we suggest that interventions could teach the more useful forms of praise. In a randomized trial of a reading intervention (Andersen & Nielsen, 2016), parents were told about the malleability of their child's reading abilities (i.e., taught a growth mind-set) and how to support their child by praising his or her effort. The intervention increased children's reading and writing achievements at 2- and 7-month follow-up. We need more research to understand how best to use praise to benefit children's long-term outcomes. Praising effort alone may not always suffice, because children need successful strategies and effective help-seeking—not just effort—to learn and improve (Dweck, 2015). For example, would giving a variety of kinds of process praise (e.g., for using effective strategies, seeking advice, utilizing resources) be more effective than praise for just effort?

### **Conclusion**

In their attempts to boost children's self-esteem and motivation, parents and teachers sometimes use forms of praise that can backfire. We have proposed a transactional model that sheds light on these paradoxical effects of praise. We hope that our model will encourage researchers to join forces in understanding how parents' and teachers' feedback can be optimized to help children seek challenges, enjoy learning, and achieve their potential.

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