

Want to Raise Successful Kids?

Science Says Praise Them Like This. (Most Parents Do the Opposite) Stop praising them for their innate or God-given abilities, and instead focus on their effort.

– by Bill Murphy Jr., Inc.com

What if I were to tell you that you could increase the odds that your kids will achieve great success in life—maybe greater success than you’ve had—simply by making a small change in how you praise them and talk about achievement? It turns out, you can. What’s more, this change flies in the face of almost everything we’ve been told by so-called experts about raising successful kids—at least for the past 15 years or more. It’s all about how we praise our kids for their accomplishments. An emerging and exciting body of research on the subject suggests several key things we might not have realized otherwise:

Praising kids merely for their innate abilities, such as their intelligence, actually makes it less likely that they’ll grow up to enjoy learning and to excel.

- Praising kids instead for the strategies and processes they develop to solve problems—even when they don’t fully succeed—makes them more likely to try harder and ultimately achieve.
- And—perhaps the kicker—the effects of these praise strategies can be quantified even when we’re talking about children as young as 1 to 3 years of age. (So once again, my 15-month-old daughter will get the benefit of something I’ve learned while writing for Inc.!)

As you might imagine, this would mean that the so-called experts who told us to praise our kids endlessly (part of the “everyone gets a participation trophy” movement) were dead wrong. (I’ve written a lot this subject at Inc. and put together a free e-book: *How to Raise Successful Kids*.)

How does it all work? We’ll talk below about two studies involving school-age children, both led by Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University. First, however, let’s examine the difference between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset, which underlies the whole thing.

Fixed vs. growth mindset

This is really what this research is all about—teaching kids to develop growth mindsets rather than fixed mindsets. When it comes to beliefs about human achievement, a fixed mindset is the belief that intelligence, for example, is almost entirely innate. Either you’re born with great smarts and the ability to achieve, or you’re not. A growth mindset, on the other hand, is the belief that achievement (again, for our purposes in the intellectual realm) is much more variable, and that intelligence and problem-solving abilities can be developed over time.

You might summarize the whole thing by thinking of Albert Einstein, Dweck suggests. A person with a fixed mindset might say, “Einstein was brilliant.” A person with a growth mindset might observe that Einstein solved some incredibly difficult problems. As for teaching growth mindsets, writer Angie Aker summarized Dweck’s work and put it like this on Upworthy: *“Praise your child explicitly for how capable they are of learning rather than telling them how smart they are.”*

The seventh-graders

Back to Dweck’s research. A few years ago, she and her team took 373 middle school students, and identified those who exhibited fixed mindsets and those who exhibited growth mindsets.

Then, they followed them for two years—from the start of seventh grade to the end of eighth grade. The dichotomy was stark. “By the end of the first term, their grades jumped apart and continued to diverge over the next two years. The only thing that differed was their mindsets,” Dweck said in a video. As you might expect, the ones who exhibited growth mindsets achieved more than their classmates who had fixed mindsets. Dweck said she has identified several key differences between the two types of students.

1. Goals

Students with a fixed mindset had one goal in mind: “Look smart at all times and at all costs.” That meant they worked to avoid any task that might show they weren’t as smart as they thought they were. Students with a growth mindset, on the other hand, didn’t care if their mistakes were revealed to their peers; they saw this as inevitable and nothing to be ashamed of, because their goal was to “learn at all times and at all costs.”

2. Attitudes toward effort and failure

Students with a fixed mindset viewed effort and failure as bad things, because the mere fact that someone worked hard or came up short demonstrated (to them) that the person didn’t have innate ability. Growth-mindset students, on the other hand, believed that effort was what was required to unlock ability. Dweck says the notion that effort is a bad thing “is one of the worst beliefs that anyone can have.”

3. Boredom and difficulty

Students who demonstrated a fixed mindset were far more likely to complain of being bored in school, Dweck found. They seemed to get into a cycle in which they used boredom as a cover to suggest why they wouldn’t try things that they found difficult; in the process they actually became bored.

Growth-mindset students, on the other hand, looked at schoolwork as a series of challenges and puzzles to figure out. They were also less likely to complain that a teacher, or a course, or another external factor, was responsible if they had difficulty.

The 11-year-olds

All of this is great, but if you’re a parent, you likely want to explore not just why a growth mindset is advantageous, but also how to encourage your kids to develop that kind of attitude. Fortunately, Dweck has a study for that, too.

She and her team divided a group of 11-year-olds into three groups, and gave each of them a fairly easy but age-appropriate intelligence test. At the end, they praised each of the kids in one of three ways:

- They praised one group for their innate intelligence
- They praised one group for the processes they came up with to solve the test
- They praised a third group, as a control, for a passing score, without mentioning either their intelligence or the process they had used.

Results?

The first part won’t surprise you. Praising their intelligence put kids into a fixed mindset. Praising their effort and process, on the other hand, pushed them into a growth mindset. But Dweck said things actually went further: “The most astonishing thing to us was that praising intelligence turned kids off to learning.”

The babies and a few examples

So, how early is too early to start praising strategies and processes over innate ability? Very early, according to Dweck. In fact, her research shows that the way mothers praise babies as young as 1 to 3 years in age can predict the child’s “mindset and desire for challenge five years later.” (Dweck says that after conducting her research, she’s been known to interrupt moms she’s seen in airports telling their babies that they’re geniuses.)

So what should you do instead? Here are a couple of ideas. Instead of praising a child for solving a puzzle or accomplishing an easy goal, Dweck suggests saying something like, “I’m sorry I wasted your time. Let’s do something hard—something you can learn from.” Or, instead of asking your kids at dinner how school was today, go around the table and ask everyone to share a story of how they struggled with something. (You have to share, too!)