

Poisonous Praise

Re-thinking comments to encourage learning rather than the status quo



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Tags:

I find myself praising my daughter for doing absolutely nothing. She'll be lying on her play-mat, moving her toys around and smiling and I'll coo variations of "Oh, good girl! Aren't you smart! What a good girl!"

According to Dweck, when I praise her for being something like a "good girl" or a "smart little baby" I am unwittingly confining her to those labels, teaching her to develop a fixed-mindset as opposed to a growth-mindset. One day, when she's contemplating speaking out against the status quo she might keep quiet because voicing an unpopular opinion isn't what "good girls" do. Likewise, instead of taking risks with her learning and attempting a challenging task, she might stick with the familiar, a task she knows she can tackle with success.

This is a hard habit to break. I do it with my students too.

I don't do it in writing. I don't deface the margins of their papers with fixed-mindset-encouraging exclamations like "Well done!" and "Great work!"

Instead, I do it to their faces, in front of others, their peers. During discussions, when students contribute their ideas I often respond, "Good idea," or "Great, thank you." How many learners have I silenced because they had felt uncertain about the Good-ness of their idea?



As I write this, my daughter is struggling to crawl and I watch her practice. She pushes the top half of her body into the air, but struggles to rise up to her knees. In yoga, she'd be doing the perfect cobra. I fight against the urge to praise her intelligence and strength

"Wow, Abby! You're working so hard! Excellent effort, my girl! Good job."