

How to use praise to encourage a growth Mindset

Parents aim for their children to be successful. However, often their helpful judgements, examples and motivating techniques send the wrong message to their children. In fact, every word and action sends a message. It tells children how to think about themselves. It can be a fixed mindset message which says: "You have permanent characteristics and I'm judging them." Or it can be a growth mindset message that says: "You are a developing person and I'm interested in your development."



Messages about success

Listen for the messages in the following examples:

- ✓ "You learned that so quickly! You're so smart!"
- ✓ "Look at that drawing. Sara, is he the next Picasso or what?"
- ✓ "You're so brilliant, you got an A without even revising!"

If you're like most parents, you hear these as supportive, esteem-boosting messages. But, listen more closely. These are the messages many children hear:

- ✗ "If I don't learn something quickly, I'm not smart."
- ✗ "I shouldn't try drawing anything hard or they'll see I'm no Picasso."
- ✗ "If I start revising they'll stop thinking I'm brilliant."

Messages about failure

Nine-year-old Libby was on her way to her first gymnastics competition. Long-limbed, flexible and energetic, she was just right for gymnastics, and she loved it. She was a little nervous about competing, but she was good at gymnastics and felt confident about doing well. She had even thought about the perfect place in her room to place the trophy she would win.

In the first event, the floor exercises, Libby went first. Although she did a good job, the scoring changed after the first few girls and she lost. Libby also did well in the other events, but not well enough to win. By the end of the evening, she had received no trophies and was devastated.

What would you do if you were Libby's parents?

1. Tell Libby that you thought she was the best.
2. Tell her she was robbed of a trophy that was rightfully hers.
3. Re-assure her that gymnastics is not that important.
4. Tell her that she has the ability and will surely win next time
5. Tell her that she didn't deserve to win.

There is a strong message in our society about how to boost children's self-esteem, and a main part of that message is: Protect them from failure! While this may help with the immediate problem of the child's disappointment, it can be harmful in the long run. Why?



If we consider the five possible reactions from a mindset point of view:

The first (you thought she was the best) is insincere. She was not the best – you know it, and she does too. This offers her no recipe for how to recover, or how to improve.



The second (she was robbed) places blame on others, when in fact the problem was mostly with her performance, not the judges. Do you want her to grow up blaming others for her deficiencies?

The third (reassure her that gymnastics doesn't really matter) teaches her to devalue something if she doesn't do well in it right away.

The fourth (she has the ability) may be the most dangerous message of all. Does ability automatically take you where you want to go? If Libby didn't win this competition, why should she win the next one?

The last opinion (tell her that she didn't deserve to win) seems hardhearted under the circumstances. You wouldn't quite say it that way. However, that's largely what her growth-minded father told her.

Here's what he actually said: "Libby, I know how you feel. It's so disappointing to have your hopes up and to perform your best but not to win. But you know, you haven't really earned it yet. There were many girls there who have been in gymnastics longer than you and who've worked a lot harder than you. If this is something you really want, then it's something you'll really have to work for."

He also let Libby know that if she wanted to do gymnastics purely for fun, which was just fine. But if she wanted to excel in the competitions, more was required.

Libby took this to heart, spending much more time repeating and perfecting her routines, especially the ones she was weakest in. At the next meeting there were eighty girls from all over the area. Libby won five medals for the individual events and was the overall champion of the competition, for which she received a large trophy.

In essence, her father had not only told her the truth, but also taught her how to learn from her failures and do what it takes to succeed in the future. He sympathised deeply with her disappointment, but he did not give her a phoney boost that would only lead to further disappointment.

Constructive criticism

'Constructive' means helping the child to fix something, build a better product or do a better job. Often a lot of the criticism a child receives is not helpful at all, but full of judgement about a child. Here is an example:

Billy rushed through his homework, missing several questions and answering the others in a short, careless way. His mother lost her temper: "Is *this* your homework? You are either thick or irresponsible. Which is it?" The feedback managed to question her son's intelligence and character at the same time and imply that the defects were permanent. How could the mother have expressed her frustration and disappointment in a more constructive manner. Here are some ways:

- ✓ "Billy, it really makes me upset when you don't do a proper job. When do you think you can complete this?"
- ✓ "Billy, is there something you didn't understand in the task? Would you like me to go over it with you?"
- ✓ "Son, I feel disappointed when I see you missing a chance to learn. Can you think of a way to do this that would help you to learn more?"