The Praise Paradox: When and Why Praise Backfires in Children With Low Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT—***In contemporary Western society, many adults use praise to boost children's self-esteem. Accordingly, they might praise those who seem to need it the most: children with low self-esteem. In this article, we review research showing that certain types of praise can backfire, especially in children with low self-esteem. Adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem person praise (e.g., "You're smart!") and inflated praise (e.g., "That's incredibly beautiful!"). Paradoxically, such praise can lower these children's motivation and feelings of self-worth in the face of setbacks (e.g., when they struggle or fail). Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, might invite more person praise and inflated praise from adults, creating a self-sustaining downward spiral. We propose a transactional model to shed light on this apparent praise paradox, and we describe the model's implications for theory and research.***

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The work reported in this article was supported by a Fulbright Scholarship to Eddie Brummelman and by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (431-09-022). We thank Carol Dweck for her valuable comments on an earlier draft. The views expressed in this article are the authors'.

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DOI: 10.1111/cdep.12171

KEYWORDS—*praise; self-esteem; transactional*

> When twelve-year-old Linda arrived at the third level of her videogame, her father exclaimed, "You're great! You have perfect coordination! You're an expert player." Linda lost interest and walked away. Her father's praise made it difficult for her to continue because she said to herself, "Dad thinks I'm a great player, but I'm no expert. I made the third level by luck. If I try again, I may not even make the second level. It is better to quit while I'm ahead." (1, p. 37)

Western society believes strongly in the power of praise, especially to support children with low self-esteem. At this very moment, probably thousands of parents, teachers, and educators are praising children with low self-esteem, using person praise (e.g., "You're great!") and inflated praise (e.g., "You have perfect coordination!"). However, emerging research shows that these types of praise can backfire in children with low self-esteem. In this article, we shed light on this apparent *praise paradox*. We define praise, propose a transactional model to understand the praise paradox, and identify directions for research.

DEFINING PRAISE

Praise refers to explicit verbal positive evaluations of another person's products, actions, or traits, where the evaluations are based on the evaluator's subjective standards (2). This definition highlights three key features of praise. First, praise consists of positive evaluations that are stated explicitly (e.g., "You made a great painting!") rather than implicitly (e.g., "I'll put your painting on the fridge!"), and conveyed verbally (i.e., written or spoken) rather than nonverbally (e.g., thumbs-up). Second, praise focuses on another person's—not one's own—products (e.g., a painting), actions (e.g., the act of painting), or traits (e.g., having a skill for painting). Third, praise is based on the evaluator's subjective standards. Evaluations based on objective standards, such as standardized test scores, are not considered praise.

Child Development Perspectives

TRANSACTIONAL MODEL

According to research, praise can enhance and undermine children's motivation and feelings of self-worth, depending on how the praise is phrased (3–5). Praise has been studied primarily as a unidirectional process, with adults' praise shaping children's outcomes. Yet over the past decades, the shaping of children by socializing agents has come to be understood as part of a transactional process (for an overview, see 6). Children are not mere recipients of socialization, but their characteristics shape the socialization they receive, which in turn shapes them (7, 8). Sometimes children elicit socialization practices that reduce deviant outcomes (e.g., children's poor grades can lead their parents to provide unsolicited homework assistance, which raises grades; 9). At other times, children elicit socialization practices that amplify deviant outcomes (e.g., children's aggression can make their parents lenient, which inadvertently reinforces aggression; 10). Within this transactional perspective, adults and children are seen as mutually shaping one another. Building on this principle, we propose a transactional model of praise. Extending previous theories of praise, our model does not focus solely on how praise affects the child, but on transactions between the praiser (adult) and the individual being praised (child).

According to our transactional model of praise (see Figure 1), when children have low self-esteem, adults consider this a problem and use praise to "cure" the problem. Thus, children are not mere recipients of praise, but their low self-esteem elicits praise from adults. Unfortunately, adults often use forms of praise—person praise and inflated praise—that backfire in children with low self-esteem. Conventional wisdom tells adults that these forms of praise benefit children with low self-esteem. Yet rather than raising self-esteem, such praise backfires in the face of setbacks, lowering these children's motivation and feelings of self-worth. Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, further motivate adults to raise children's self-esteem by offering more praise, establishing a self-sustaining downward spiral. As such, adults' unsuccessful attempts to cure children's low self-esteem by praising them can become self-sustaining, and lower children's motivation and feelings of self-worth over time. In what follows, we outline each step of our model and provide empirical evidence.

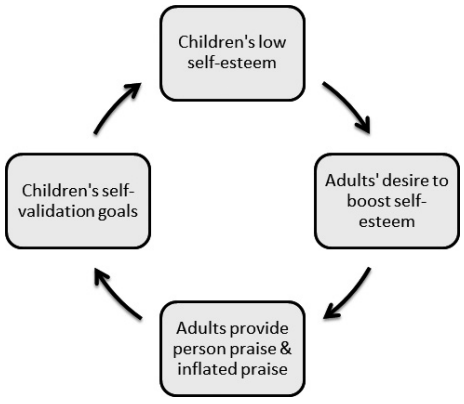

Figure 1. Transactional model of praise. When children have low self-esteem, adults are motivated to raise their self-esteem through person praise and inflated praise. But such praise leads these children to pursue self-validation goals, which lower motivation and feelings of self-worth in the face of setbacks. Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, further motivate adults to raise children's self-esteem, establishing a downward spiral.

Adults' Desire to Boost Self-Esteem

Western adults view low self-esteem in children as a problem (11) and are motivated to cure it through praise. Praise is widely seen as a cure for low self-esteem. Interventions to boost self-esteem rely on praise as one of their key components (12). Also, self-help books and websites state that "one of the most common and effective ways to build children's self-esteem is to praise them" (13, para. 23), and that whenever a child feels bad, "find his good points and praise them and he will feel good about himself" (14, p. 3). Adults have internalized these messages: 87% of parents believe that children need praise in order to feel good about themselves (15).

Praise comes in different forms and doses, varying in focus and extremity. *Focus* refers to whether praise is directed at personal qualities (e.g., "You're so smart!") or the process through which success was achieved (e.g., "You worked so hard!"; 16). *Extremity* refers to whether praise conveys an overly positive, inflated evaluation (e.g., "You made an incredibly beautiful drawing!") or a less positive, noninflated evaluation (e.g., "You made a beautiful drawing!"; 17). Driven by the desire to cure low self-esteem, many adults use person praise and inflated praise.

Person Praise

One might think that praising children's personal qualities would automatically boost their self-esteem. Therefore, adults might be inclined to give person praise to children with low self-esteem. In one study, parents read scenarios involving children with either high or low self-esteem—such as: "Sarah is often happy [unhappy] with herself. She has just made a drawing" (18)—then wrote down the praise they would give. Parents gave children with low self-esteem more person praise (30%) than they gave children with high self-esteem (14%). By contrast, they gave children with low self-esteem somewhat less process praise.

When children are praised for their personal qualities, such as their intelligence or worth, they may believe these qualities are something they either have or do not have—a *fixed mindset* (3). Children thus become concerned with how smart or worthy they are, seeking tasks that will prove these qualities and avoiding those that disprove them. When children then encounter setbacks, they may attribute them to lack of smartness or worth, and therefore give up and feel down about themselves. Land-

mark experiments have demonstrated these effects (16, 19, 20). In one set of studies (20), children received person praise ("You're so smart!"), process praise ("You've worked so hard!"), or no praise for their performance on a task. Children who received person praise avoided challenging tasks. When they subsequently failed on the task, they gave up sooner, performed less optimally, and experienced reduced feelings of self-worth. But children who received process praise sought challenging tasks, and when they failed, they persisted longer, performed more optimally, and maintained their feelings of self-worth. Longitudinal studies have replicated these findings (21, 22).

Person praise may backfire, especially among children with low self-esteem. These children are self-protective; they avoid risks, want to hide weaknesses, and do not want to draw attention to themselves (23). When they receive person praise, they may become especially concerned with how smart or worthy they are, and feel down about themselves when they fail. In one experiment (18), children reported their self-esteem and then played a competitive game. They were randomly assigned to receive person praise ("You're great!"), process praise ("You did a great job!"), or no praise after practicing the game. Children were then randomly assigned to succeed or fail at the game. As predicted, person praise caused children, especially those with low self-esteem, to feel ashamed after failure (e.g., worthless, inferior, and exposed). Process praise did not affect the children adversely. Thus, adults were inclined to direct person praise at children with low self-esteem, but this inclination backfired.

Inflated Praise

Adults may also try to raise children's self-esteem by giving inflated praise. Instead of telling children they did well, adults may tell them they did *incredibly* well. In one study, adults read scenarios involving children with high or low self-esteem, then wrote down the praise they would give (17). Adults gave children with low self-esteem more inflated praise (33%) than they gave children with high self-esteem (18%). These findings were replicated in in-home observations of parent–child interactions (17).

How does inflated praise affect children with low self-esteem? Because praise sets a standard, children who are praised for doing incredibly well might infer that they should do incredibly well all the time (5). Thus, inflated praise pressures children to continue to perform exceptionally (2, 24, 25). Such a message can hinder children with low self-esteem because of their self-protective nature. When children with low self-esteem receive inflated praise, they fear that they will not be able to live up to the high standard set for them, and therefore avoid challenges and miss out on crucial learning experiences. But when they receive noninflated praise, they believe they can live up to the more realistic standard set for them and seek more challenges.

In an experiment (17), children reported their self-esteem and were then invited to draw a painting, *Wild Roses* by Vincent van Gogh. Their drawing was ostensibly evaluated by a professional painter. Children were randomly assigned to receive inflated praise ("You made an *incredibly* beautiful drawing!"), noninflated praise ("You made a beautiful drawing!"), or no praise. Children were then presented with pairs of drawings. From each pair, they chose which one to draw—the simple drawing ("you won't make many mistakes, but you won't learn much either") or the complex drawing ("you might make many mistakes, but you'll definitely learn a lot too"). As predicted, inflated praise led children with low self-esteem to choose the simpler drawings. However, noninflated praise led them to choose more complex drawings. Thus, adults were inclined to give inflated praise to children with low self-esteem, but again, this inclination backfired.

The opposite held for children with high self-esteem, who felt encouraged by inflated praise to take on more challenges. Research in adults provides converging evidence, showing that extremely positive feedback (e.g., "exceptional" test scores) leads to worries about future performance in people with low self-esteem, but not in those with high self-esteem (26).

Children's Self-Validation Goals

What do person praise and inflated praise have in common that makes them backfire in children with low self-esteem? We suggest that both forms of praise lead children with low self-esteem to adopt *self-validation goals*—goals to validate aspects of the self, and hence self-worth (27). As one scholar noted, "Undoubtedly, the most threatening aspect of praise is the obligation it puts upon us to be praiseworthy people" (28, p. 63). When children pursue self-validation goals, they become preoccupied with the meaning of events for their worth as a person (27, 29). They become driven by the desire to gain or avoid losing self-worth, rather than by their intrinsic motivation or personal values (25, 30). When they think they might fail, they avoid the task and miss out on crucial learning experiences. When they struggle with a task or fail, they infer that they are worthless. Short-term feelings of worthlessness can compound into stable levels of low self-esteem (31). Thus, person praise and inflated praise can exacerbate the problems they intend to solve.

In summary, to support children with low self-esteem, adults often give them person praise and inflated praise. But instead of raising self-esteem, such praise leads these children to pursue self-validation goals, which can backfire in the face of setbacks, and leads to lower motivation and feelings of self-worth. Lowered feelings of self-worth, in turn, further motivate adults to raise self-esteem by praising children, thus establishing a self-sustaining downward spiral.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

To understand praise, researchers should examine not only how praise affects children, but also how children's characteristics, such as their self-esteem, elicit praise from others. That is,

researchers should adopt a transactional perspective that recognizes children's role in shaping their own socialization experiences (6). This perspective sheds light on the moment-by-moment transactions between the praiser and the individual being praised, as well as on the longer-term effects of praise. Longitudinal research shows that parents' praise can shape children's views of themselves over months or even years (21, 22). Yet the mechanisms through which praise exerts long-term effects are unknown. Praise may not remain accessible in children's minds for long. Rather, it may set in motion a transactional process, with adults' well-intentioned praise lowering children's motivation and feelings of self-worth, which in turn encourages adults to give even more person praise and inflated praise. These effects are self-sustaining and may therefore compound over time.

Our model also provides a window into why many adults continue to believe in the benign nature of person praise and inflated praise. When adults give such praise, children's initial response is most likely positive—smiling, sitting upright, and looking confident (32). This initial positive response might reinforce adults' use of these types of praise. However, the same instance of praise might backfire later, when children struggle with a difficult task or fail. Adults might not recognize these harmful effects as a result of praise because these effects are counterintuitive and can occur long after the praise has been given. Thus, although the positive effects of person praise and inflated praise seem obvious, their harmful effects fly under the radar.

Our model adds to research showing that well-intended and seemingly benign socialization practices can backfire (33). One such practice is *conditional regard*: making affection and appreciation contingent on children's achievements. Although often believed to spark children's motivation, conditional regard conveys to children that they are worthy when they succeed, but worthless when they fail. This may put stifling pressure on children to excel, and thus undermine their intrinsic motivation (34). Again, what seems like common sense can lead adults to rely on socialization practices that have unintended consequences.

LOOKING AHEAD

Our review of the literature identifies promising directions for research. One direction is to investigate praise across developmental phases. Research on praise has focused primarily on late childhood, when children can form self-esteem and readily use praise to evaluate themselves and to set standards for their performance (35). Yet praise can be consequential from an earlier age. Younger children, even preschoolers, already have a sense of their "goodness" or "badness" that can be shaped by praise (16, 36). Researchers should examine whether praise is more consequential during some phases of development than others.

Researchers should also examine cross-cultural differences in the use of praise. Praise seems to be used scarcely by parents from non-Western, collectivistic countries such as China (5). Indeed, Chinese parents place less emphasis on children's successes (e.g., praise less) and more emphasis on their failures (e.g., criticize more) than do their American counterparts (37), possibly because they attach less value to children's self-esteem (38). Yet little is known about how types of praise, such as person praise and inflated praise, are used differently across cultures.

Researchers should also identify why some adults do not fall prey to the praise paradox. Perhaps these adults do not see low self-esteem as a problem and therefore refrain from praising children (11). However, it is more likely that they do see low self-esteem as a problem but do not try to cure it by giving person praise and inflated praise. They might rely on more adaptive forms of praise, such as process praise (e.g., "You worked so hard!") and noninflated praise (e.g., "You made a beautiful drawing!"). Also, they might not attempt to raise self-esteem directly by lavishing children with praise, but do so indirectly by helping children master difficult new tasks (39) and building supportive relationships with them (40).

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to raise children's self-esteem, adults often use types of praise that paradoxically backfire. As psychologist and educator Haim Ginott aptly noted, "there are rules and cautions that govern the handling of potent medicines—rules about timing and dosage, cautions about possible allergic reactions. There are similar regulations about the administration of emotional medicine" (1, p. 32). By proposing a model to understand paradoxical effects of praise, we hope to give researchers and practitioners a framework to guide their inquiries into praise.

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