

# Study finds children with low self-esteem are often praised for personal qualities instead of efforts

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(Medical Xpress)—Praising children, especially those with low self-esteem, for their personal qualities rather than their efforts may make them feel more ashamed when they fail, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

"This type of personal praise may backfire. What may seem like common sense can sometimes lead adults astray in their attempts to help [children](#) with low self-esteem feel better about themselves," said lead researcher Eddie Brummelman, MS, of Utrecht University in the Netherlands. The study was published online in the [Journal of Experimental Psychology: General](#).

The study found that children with low self-esteem often received praise for their personal qualities, and that type of praise can trigger greater feelings of [shame](#) from failure and may lead to a diminished sense of self-worth.

In one experiment, 357 parents in the Netherlands, ranging in age from 29 to 66, read six descriptions of hypothetical children—three with high self-esteem (e.g., "Lisa usually likes the kind of person she is,") and three with low self-esteem (e.g., "Sarah is often unhappy with herself"). The [participants](#) were told to write down the praise they would give the child for completing an activity, such as drawing a picture. On average, the parents gave children with low self-esteem more than twice as much

praise directed at personal qualities (e.g., "You're a great artist!") than they gave to children with high self-esteem. They also were more likely to praise children with high self-esteem for their efforts. (e.g., "You did a great job drawing!")

"Adults may feel that praising children for their inherent qualities helps combat low self-esteem, but it might convey to children that they are valued as a person only when they succeed," Brummelman said. "When children subsequently fail, they may infer they are unworthy."

A second experiment illustrated that point. The researchers recruited 313 children (54 percent girls) ranging in age from 8 to 13 from five public elementary schools in the Netherlands. Several days before the experiment, the students completed a standard test that measures self-esteem. For the experiment, the children were told they would play an online reaction time game against a student from another school and that a webmaster would be monitoring their performance via the Internet. In reality, the computer controlled the outcome of the game, and the children were divided into winners and losers, including groups that received praise for themselves, praise for their efforts, or no praise.

In the group where the children were praised for their personal qualities, the webmaster wrote, "Wow, you're great!" after the students completed one round of the game, whereas the children whose actions were praised were told, "Wow, you did a great job!" The group that received no praise served as a control. After a second round, the children were told they either won or lost the game, and they completed a survey about their feelings of shame. Children who lost the game experienced a sharp increase in shame if they had been praised for their personal qualities, especially if they had [low self-esteem](#), compared to the other groups.

The researchers theorized that children who are praised for their efforts may not associate their self-worth with success, so failure is viewed as a

temporary setback or a lack of effort rather than a flaw in their character. Brummelman said the study results may apply generally to children from most Western countries, including the United States, but the results may be less applicable to Eastern countries, such as China, where adults may use different approaches for praising children.

The differences between praising a person and praising his or her efforts may be very subtle, but those differences can have a big impact on children's self-esteem, said study co-author Brad Bushman, PhD, a communication and psychology professor at The Ohio State University. Therefore, [parents](#) and teachers should focus on praising children for their efforts rather than their personal qualities, he added.

"In general, it is better to praise the behavior rather than the individual," Bushman said. "If you praise the individual and he fails, it can cause shame and may inadvertently send the message, 'I am a bad person.'"

**More information:** Brummelman, E. et al. On Feeding Those Hungry for Praise: Person Praise Backfires in Children With Low Self-Esteem, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*; online Feb. 26, 2013. [www.apa.org/pubs/journals/rela ... e-ofp-brummelman.pdf](http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/rela...e-ofp-brummelman.pdf)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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