

Kids praised for being smart are more likely to cheat, new studies find

September 12 2017



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Kids who are praised for being smart, or who are told they have a reputation for being smart, are more likely to be dishonest and cheat, a pair of studies from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

(OISE) at the University of Toronto and researchers in the U.S. and China has found.

OISE's Jackman Institute of Child Studies (JICS) Professor Kang Lee and study co-authors say that while praise is one of the most commonly used forms of reward by parents and educators around the world, studies show that when used incorrectly, it can backfire: "Giving [children](#) wrong kind of praise makes them dishonest," said Professor Lee.

'Smart' versus 'doing great'

In the first study, "Praising young children for being smart promotes cheating", published today in *Psychological Science*, preschoolers who were praised for being smart were more likely to cheat subsequently than those who were praised for doing "great" in a particular task. Similarly, in the second study, "Telling [young children](#) they have a reputation for being smart promotes cheating", recently published in *Developmental Science*, preschoolers who were told that they had a reputation for being smart also became more likely to cheat.

In first study, researchers asked three and five-year-olds to play a guessing game. When children did well in one occasion they were praised in one of two ways: one half of the children were praised for being smart (i.e., "You are so smart."), while the other half were praised for their performance (i.e., "You did very well this time."). After receiving either type of praise, the children continued to play the guessing games. Researchers then left the room after asking children to promise not to cheat by peeking at the answers. Their behaviour was then monitored by a hidden camera.

Results show that despite the subtle difference between the two forms of praise, the children who were praised for being smart were more likely to act dishonestly than the children who had been praised for their

behaviour in a specific game. Results were the same for both ages.

In the second study, researchers told each child that he or she had a reputation for being smart. Hearing this, similarly to receiving direct "smartness" praise, also had the effect of increasing children's tendency to cheat.

'Ability praise' seen as linked to stable traits

Why is it that giving children praise for being smart promotes dishonesty?

"Praise is more complex than it seems," said Professor Lee. "Praising a child's ability implies that the specific behaviour that is commented on stems from stable traits related to one's ability, such as smartness. This is different than other forms of praise, such as praising specific behaviours or praising effort."

Noting previous research which shows ability praise can undermine a child's motivation to learn when they encounter difficulties, University of California San Diego Professor Gail Heyman, co-author of the studies, said, "Our findings show that the negative effects of ability praise extend beyond this to promoting dishonesty, and that this occurs in children as young as three years of age."

Being 'smart' creates expectations

Hangzhou Normal University's Professor Li Zhao, also co-author of the studies, explained that when children are praised for being smart or learn that they have a reputation for being smart, "they feel pressure to perform well in order to live up to others' expectations, even if they need to cheat to do so." She further explained that praising a child's specific

behaviour does not imply that the child is expected to consistently perform well and therefore does not have similar negative effects as ability praise.

Overall, Professor Lee said for adults, the studies show the importance of learning to praise in a way that doesn't prompt or promote dishonest behaviour.

"We want to encourage children, we want them to feel good about themselves. But these studies show we must learn to give children the right kinds of praise, such as praising specific [behaviour](#). Only in this way, will praise have the intended positive outcomes."

More information: 1. [Praising young children for being smart promotes cheating](#)

2. [Telling young children they have a reputation for being smart promotes cheating](#)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Kids praised for being smart are more likely to cheat, new studies find (2017, September 12) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-kids-smart.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.