

BY Heidi Stevens

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Gregg Segal

IN CRITICISM OF



praise

Reckoning with failure is key to kids' growth, but they're buried in mountains of flattery. How did we get here? And why can't we stop?

A sandy-haired soccer player missed his shot and is seeking solace in the lap of his **biggest fan.**

"I'm horrible," he sobs into his mother's neck.

"No, you're not!" she replies. "You're doing awesome out there!"

"So awesome!" Grandma chimes in.

"We're so proud of you!" Mom adds. "You're a superstar, buddy!"

"No, I'm not," the boy cries. "I'm horrible."

He is not doing awesome out there. He is, by most measures, horrible.

Not that it matters much; the scrimmage is playing out among 4- and 5-year-olds in a warehouse-style soccer school on Chicago's North Side. The players mostly turn the orange safety cones into dunce caps as their bored parents scroll through Facebook on the sidelines. College scouts are not circling. Stakes are not high.

As with most pursuits among modern children, their performance is immaterial. How they *feel* about their performance, however, is paramount.

In the past three decades, parents have turned childhood into a sacred garden in which to plant the seeds of self-esteem, cultivate those seeds with enriching endeavors, and fertilize them with heaping helpings of praise. No gesture is too small to escape exaltation. Every achievement—indeed, every movement—is an opportunity to rhapsodize. All this despite clear and mounting evidence that this type of reinforcement is damaging our kids: The more they're called Extra Super Smart Geniuses, the further they go to protect that label—including bowing out of any activity that might challenge their reputation. They stop taking risks, and their intellectual and emotional growth is stunted. Why, then, are we still so enamored of praise?

That sandy-haired boy who missed his shot is on my son Will's soccer team. Will is also, by most measures, horrible. He spends his field time practicing amateur ninja moves on other players

and can often be found running in the opposite direction of both his team and the ball. Fine by me, as my only goals in signing him up for the class were exercise and fun. But when he exits the field at the end of the scrimmage, here's what I say: "Great job, buddy! You were amazing out there! Were you kicking with *both* of your feet?"

"That's dribbling," he tells me.

"Seriously?" I reply, mouth agape. "That's amazing."

I know it's dribbling. It's not amazing.

Not praising him, though, would be like forgetting the water bottle. The other kids would be hydrating post-game—replenishing, if you will—and my son would be left feeling thirsty and neglected. *He expects it*, I tell myself. *It's good for him.* And what would the other parents think if I didn't echo their sentiments?

I'm not alone. In the best seller *Nurture-Shock: New Thinking About Children*, Po Bronson describes his attempts to wean himself and his son off praise. "In the first stage, I fell off the wagon around other parents when they were busy praising their kids. I didn't want Luke to feel left out. I felt like a former alcoholic who continues to drink socially. I became a Social Praiser."



Carol Dweck suspected early on that confidence wasn't born of nonstop success; nor was it the backbone of achievement. The Stanford University psychology professor is widely credited as the leading pioneer in praise research. As a graduate student at Yale in 1972, she conducted a study in which she intentionally presented children with a series of problems that were beyond their academic level to induce widespread failure. "Some of them, as I predicted, acted like it was the end of the world, that they were no good, they'd never succeed

and so forth," she recalls. "Others, as I expected, coped with it. Others, as I had not expected, loved it. They'd tell me, 'I love a challenge!' I was hoping this would be informative!"

"I thought, *What's wrong with them? This is failure!*" she says with a laugh. "They were acting like it was a gift."

In many ways it was. Failure can motivate kids to brush up on their skills and tackle a problem from a different approach. And, perhaps most importantly, it can build their resilience.

A quarter-century later Dweck published a seminal, landscape-shifting study demonstrating that praise—at least a certain kind of praise—can actually backfire. Her assistants administered a relatively easy IQ test to groups of New York City fifth-graders, all of whom scored well. When they finished, each student was given his or her score, along with a line of praise. Half were told, "You must be smart at this." The other half were told, "You must have worked really hard."

The students were then given a choice of which test to take next: a harder test that promised to teach them something new or an easy

test, similar to the first. Among the students praised for effort, 90 percent chose the harder test. The majority of the students praised for intelligence chose the easy one.

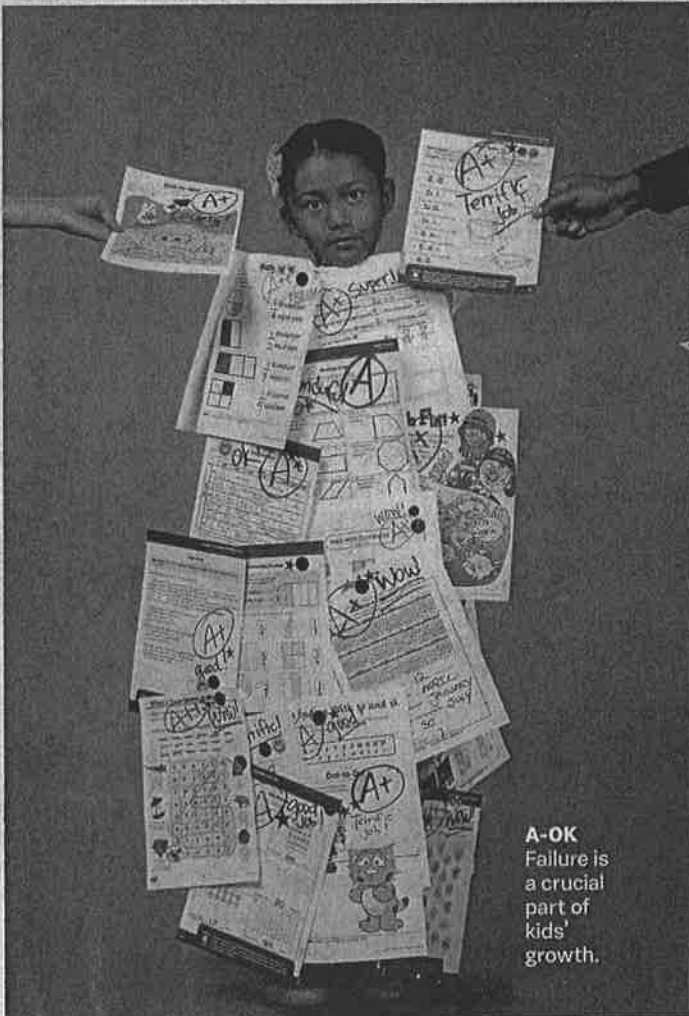
"When we praise children for their intelligence, we tell them that this is the name of the game: look smart, don't risk making mistakes," Dweck wrote at the time.

We also harm their long-term performance. Because when they do take a risk and inevitably stumble, kids fed a steady diet of praise rarely receive failure as an invitation to try, try again. "They don't know how to overcome mistakes because their performance, they thought, was based on an innate skill they either had or they didn't," says Ashley Merryman, co-author of *NurtureShock*. "They crash the hardest."

In a final round of tests, the students all received a challenge as easy as the first one. The ones praised for their effort improved their scores by an average of 30 percent. The ones told they were smart, on the other hand, decreased their scores by about 20 percent.

"Parents tell me, 'I'm going to tell my kids I love them as much as I possibly can and nothing you say is going to change that,'" Merryman says. "Of course, I've never said, 'Don't tell them you love them.' I've said, 'Don't tell them they're geniuses.'"

As Dweck frames it, "People say to me, 'But my child really is a genius.' And I say, 'Well, there are an awful lot of geniuses who never went on to do anything. Do you really want to foster that?'"



A-OK
Failure is a crucial part of kids' growth.



The self-esteem movement hadn't kicked into high gear when I was growing up in the early '70s. While it began to take shape in the self-actualizing '60s, it really took off in the mid-

1980s, when California formed the State Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility with the goal of determining several things: how healthy self-esteem takes root; whether it acts as a barrier against crime, drug abuse, and other social problems; and how it might grease the wheels for academic success.

"The idea was if we boost kids' self-esteem, their achievement will come along for the ride," Merryman told an audience at a 2009 PopTech conference. "We'll give them the confidence that they know they can do it."

In an oft-cited Columbia University study, 85 percent of American parents said it's important to praise their children's intelligence in order for the kids to feel smart. "It's hard to wrap your mind around the idea that praise is not a gift," Dweck says. "Here's a gift I can give my child

PARENTING PROGRESS REPORT

Should you compliment or critique? Clap or chide? Just remember: The goal is always growth, not perfection. Here are tips on how to encourage your children to take pride in the process, from Ashley Merryman, co-author of *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children*.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Your Kid Makes Straight As

Did they study hard? Don't praise their smarts. Say: "You worked really hard, and look how it turned out!"

Is it material they already knew? No praise is warranted. Ask: "Are you bored? I want you to be challenged."

Cs are More Common

If they're doing their best, commend the effort. And offer help to inspire continued improvement.

Effort an issue? Push for serious reflection. Oftentimes, "I don't care" is code for "This is too hard."

IN THE ART STUDIO

Your Kid Paints like van Gogh

Be specific, and ask questions. "Your use of colors is interesting. Can you tell me what you were thinking here?"

It Looks Abstract, but not on Purpose

Engage with the work. "I love the way you're telling a story. What's this person thinking? What's going to happen next?"

AT THE BALLPARK

Your Kid Hits the Winning Home Run

Was it dumb luck? If you're genuinely proud, then say that. Be honest: Never use praise as manipulation.

If they've worked hard for this, say: "All those long hours in the batting cage have paid off!"

Your Kid Strikes Out, a Lot

Have they been practicing? Focus on and take pride in progress. Find creative ways to keep it fun.

Do they care? If they just want to be with friends, there's no need to praise. Encourage their best effort.

that my parents didn't give me' is the kind of pseudologic the self-esteem movement drummed into us."

My own parents didn't tell me I was a genius. I wasn't. They never declared my athletic skills "awesome." They weren't. They were supportive and warm and present, which was the case with most of my friends' parents. I'm not sure we felt a deficit of praise, but what did we have to compare our childhoods to?

When my children arrived, however, I couldn't imagine approaching their milestones and

endeavors with the cool reserve that '70s parents, mine included, seemed to possess. Parenting had become a noble, all-consuming endeavor in the decades since my friends and I were born. We were drowning in mommy blogs and lactation consultants and cookbooks instructing us to lovingly puree our own sweet potatoes. Our parents hadn't even used car seats.

I looked a little askance at their lack of praise, which followed a detached parenting style that my peers and I were largely rejecting. I was besotted with my babies and blown away by their

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every move. *Why not tell them?* I figured. And I did. Over and over and over.

Of course, we're also a panicky lot, my generation—unable, or unwilling, to stand on the sidelines of our kids' youth and hope for the best. From the time we sweat which preschool our children will attend, to the years we worry they'll be victims of cyberbullying, to the moment we realize they're inheriting an increasingly competitive marketplace, modern parents feel like it's their child against the world. We want to soothe the pain of that reality even as we prepare them to survive in it.

"Offering praise has become a sort of panacea for the anxieties of modern parenting," Bronson writes in *NurtureShock*.

But when we strip them of the chance to experience setbacks and failures—when we label their missed goals as evidence of superstardom—we may actually be harming their survival skills. "It's not that kids aren't wonderful," Merryman says. "It's the cost of telling them that all the time."

I'm beginning to witness that cost with my daughter, a perfection-seeking third-grader who was devastated by her first and only B in second grade. She's emotionally undone by losing an Uno hand. She has repeatedly tested several grade levels above her age, but she exhibits no signs of embracing failure as a gift the way Dweck's long-ago research subjects did—the ones who loved a challenge. She would rather break the rules than face second place.

And I blame myself for all of it. I spent her first eight years reminding her exhaustively of her perfect brilliance. I was amazed at her little mind and her mannerisms, even the truly unremarkable ones, and I never failed to tell her.

Now she cheats at Go Fish.



Calibrating the frequency and style of our praise is one of the most important shifts we can make as

parents, says Colorado-based child psychologist Kristin Race, author of *Mindful Parenting: Simple and Powerful Solutions for Raising Creative, Engaged, Happy Kids in Today's Hectic World*. The way we wield praise, she says, can profoundly affect not just our children's potential but also their overall happiness.

"When kids are so focused on the outcome and see mistakes not as something they can learn from and overcome but as something to be defeated by, it contributes to more anxiety and worry," she says. "A mistake or a failure becomes something I am, not something I can change. 'I'm so stupid.' 'I'm so dumb.' 'I'm no good at soccer.'"

I want their inner voice to tell them their mom thinks they're just fantastic.

That really hits me. I want my kids to achieve academic and, eventually, career success as much as the next parent. But it doesn't drive me. I worry far more about their emotional health than their report cards. When you tell me that how and how often I praise them will hurt their test scores, I'm probably going to ignore you. I have, in fact, been ignoring you.

But when you tell me I'm causing them anxiety, I'm all ears. When you tell me I'm impeding their long-term happiness, you've got my attention. I hope my kids excel at and finish college, but I don't believe for a moment that will make their lives complete. Contentedness and a positive outlook on the world? That's the stuff of a fulfilling life—or so I hope.

I suppose that's what I'm going for with my ill-advised piles of

praise. Every moment my kids aren't with me is a moment I know they're potentially subject to schoolyard taunts and feelings of rejection and disappointment. The stakes only grow higher the older they get. Maybe, if I've filled them up with enough of my own adoration, life's defeats won't sting as badly.

"The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice," *Mothering* magazine's famous editor and publisher Peggy O'Mara once said. I want their inner voice to tell them their mom thinks they're just fantastic. I have a feeling that's what motivates a whole bunch of parents to behave the way I do.

But the research is pretty clear that resilience is equally as important as that inner voice—if not more. And if our overwhelming praise is stripping them of the power to hop up and try again, then we're

helping neither their competence nor their contentedness.

A few years ago I was diagnosed with a chronic heart condition: pericardial effusion, which means a sack of mystery fluid is pressing against my heart. I shouldn't put undue strain on my heart because it's not as strong as it ought to be. But more damaging would be to shield it altogether from stress—to deprive it of the healthy strain, in the form of exercise, that it needs to experience in order to stay active and strong.

I'm beginning to realize it's the same with our children. If we weave a protective cocoon of hyperbole to shield them from the harsh realities of the world, they'll emerge too weak and ill-equipped to bounce back from the inevitable obstacles. They won't get enough exercise.

Tell me how to change, I beg Race.

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Praise is rampant and addictive, she says, but it's not all bad. She puts it in two categories: process-oriented and outcome-oriented. The first kind focuses on effort, persistence, and resourcefulness. "When we praise kids for hard work, they want to keep engaging in experiences. They see that the process, not just the outcome, provides value."

Outcome-oriented praise, on the other hand, puts the emphasis on the place they arrived rather than the effort exerted to get there. It becomes problematic when challenges arise, which kids perceive not as opportunities to grow but as threats to the greatness they're known to exhibit. "They no longer want to attempt things because they might fail, and then everyone will have been wrong," Race says.

Also problematic are the accolades for low-hanging fruit. "When we praise things that aren't challenging and don't really require much effort, it all becomes white noise," Race says. "We don't need to say, 'Nice kick!' That's what you do on the soccer field."

It also causes them to stop trusting us. "Kids know when praise is insincere," Merryman says. "By the time they're 7, they don't even take your praise at face value anymore. And by 12, especially in a classroom setting, they see it as a sign that you're worried about them—your praise is an indication that you think mediocre is the best they can do."



This is certainly true of my daughter. I responded to the dreaded B by reminding her how smart she is at math, assuring her she could pull it up to an A next quarter.

"No, I can't!" she wailed. "I'm not smart!"

Not unlike the young soccer player who, despite his mom's efforts, knew he wasn't doing awesome out there. Maybe they see through us before 7.

We also need to be more specific, Race says. "In order for the praise to be effective, they need to know exactly what they did right: 'I noticed you made three passes with your left foot!' Rather than, 'Good job!'"

"The other thing is it has to be genuine," she says. "When no matter what piece of work your child presents, you heap praise on it, they see through it. Resist the urge to say, 'That's beautiful! Good girl!' Instead, say, 'Tell me what you just made!' Your mindful engagement and attention are really what they need."

Indeed, when I receive my son's Ninja Turtle drawings with questions about who's winning, he lights up and weaves elaborate tales for me. (Tales of mayhem and warfare, but tales nonetheless.) On the other hand, "What an awesome drawing!" just sends him on his merry way.

Paul Holinger, a noted child psychiatrist at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center and founder of the Center for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy, says a more mindful approach to praise can deepen our understanding of our kids—and, thereby, our relationship with them.

By searching for specifics to home in on—*your speed has really increased since the beginning of the season!*—we invest a more genuine interest in our children. "You validate their area of interest and help them achieve a notion of their authentic self," he says. "That helps give them a sense of internal security and may even take the edge off the inevitable setbacks and failures. You convey that you love them and that your feelings are unqualified when you separate your love for them from their performance."

Connecting affection to achievement also turns love into a reward rather than a given, says Merryman. If we want to show our delight in our kids, we're better off going in for a hug than piling on more accolades. "We don't need to see our kids the same as we see dogs—in need of instant reinforcement and

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constant praise," Race says. "If you notice a behavior you want to comment on, you can wait. Maybe on the way home from the park you say, 'I noticed how well you were sharing with Jenny. How did that feel?'"

I shared my toys; my friend was happy. I ran hard; I beat my opponents to the soccer ball. I studied hard; I aced my spelling test. That's harder to grasp when your parents are interrupting every encounter with an attaboy.



Parents aren't the only ones grappling with the self-created praise monster.

Autumn Vergeldt, a 39-year-old teacher in Las Vegas, has witnessed that shift firsthand. When she studied elementary education at Eastern Illinois University in the early '90s, her instructors weren't talking much about the powers or perils of praise.

"You cushion the criticism," she says. "We do this, and we train the students to do it with each other: Give a compliment, tell them something they need to work on, then give them another compliment. Kids nowadays need a lot more rewards and praise than we did."

We've trained them to expect it, after all. Vergeldt's marriage to a crew chief in the United States Air Force means she has taught in schools around the world: first grade in Hawaii; kindergarten in Aviano, Italy; preschool in Dayton, Ohio; and now sixth-grade language arts in Las Vegas. "It's pretty universal," she says. "I wouldn't say it changes much depending on the culture."

It pleases me that we are, across cultures, taking care with children's feelings. But we need to marry that care to the knowledge that compliments won't carry them through life.

"We have a big task ahead of us," Dweck says. "The self-esteem movement changed people's intuition, their common sense." But it's never too late to change our ways. In her

book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Dweck argues that humans are infinitely capable of dropping or shifting even our most deeply ingrained habits. If parents lead the way, she says, their children will follow.

"Kids are used to going into different environments and figuring out what's valued, how to succeed, and what's going to be praised," she says. "They're going to pick up quickly that you no longer value the easy stuff and you now value doing the hard thing and sticking with it."

She's encouraged that parents, educators, and mentors are having conversations about praise, even if they haven't universally shifted away from it; that we're courting resilience in addition to self-esteem and recognizing that constant praise cultivates neither.

I carried the experts' words with me to my son's next soccer class, where I vowed to nourish him with ample water and very little fawning.

"So," I said on the car ride home. "You looked like you were having fun out there! What was your favorite part?"

"The fruit snacks," he answered.

"Yeah?" I said. "I can see that."

"And now," he said.

Yeah, I thought. *That's my favorite part too.* Then, with all the willpower I could muster, I stopped talking.

He carried on, unfazed by the praise vacuum. Maybe he isn't as thirsty for it as I suspected.

I'm also recalibrating the way I greet my daughter's struggles. When she stumbled on her multiplication homework recently, I resisted the urge to "help" her along with reminders about how good she is at math.

"Keep trying, sweetie," I told her. "It's OK to make mistakes along the way. That's the best way to learn."

"Trust me," I said. "I make them all the time."

Heidi Stevens is a columnist at the Chicago Tribune and the author of Balancing Act.



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