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Raising Praise: A Parent's Role in Influencing Adolescent Self-Esteem Through Different Forms of Praise

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Abstract

The transition to adolescence is often a time of turbulence and self-evaluation. High self-esteem is linked with a number of positive outcomes in adolescence, while low self-esteem predicts many negative outcomes. Praise is a common way parents attempt to increase their children's self-esteem, but not all praise is effective in raising self-esteem—in fact, some praise can even lower self-esteem. This literature review discusses positive forms of praise, like noninflated praise and process praise, as well as negative forms of praise, such as inflated praise and person praise. Parents can play an important role in raising adolescent self-esteem by praising in effective ways.

The transition to adolescence awakens a new and often turbulent process of self-evaluation. Although many consider adolescents' insecurities to be phasic, these self-evaluations shape the development of adolescents' self-esteem, which can greatly impact the trajectory of their lives. Self-esteem can be defined as "an individual's global evaluation of his or her overall worth as a person" (Steiger et al., 2014, p. 235). While self-esteem is an internal evaluation, it expresses itself in the

form of numerous external outcomes. As an essential factor to individual resilience, high self-esteem is strongly associated with the decreased likelihood for risky behavior in adolescence (Veselska et al., 2009). High self-esteem predicts successful romantic relationships, job performance, academic achievement, and good mental and physical health (Steiger et al., 2014; Veselska et al., 2009). Low self-esteem can be just as externally expressive as high self-esteem. Low self-esteem is correlated with delinquency, risky behavior, poor mental and physical health, low resilience, violence, and limited economic prospects (Steiger et al., 2014; Veselska et al., 2009).

Adolescence can be a particularly effective time for parents to increase their child's self-esteem through intervention because self-esteem fluctuates more in adolescence than later in life (Brummelman et al., 2017; Robins et al., 2002). Although adolescent self-esteem can be influenced by several different factors, positive and negative parental praise are related to increases and decreases in adolescent self-esteem, respectively, because both forms of parental praise affect how ado-

lescents view what they are capable of and what they find value in. This literature review will discuss parents' roles in adolescent self-esteem in the transition from childhood to adolescence through the use of negative praise, such as inflated and person-focused praise, and positive praise, such as non-inflated and process praise.

Parental Influence During Adolescence

Self-esteem fluctuates in different amounts throughout the lifespan—most notably in the transition from childhood to adolescence. In this transition, studies have found that there tends to be a sharp decline in self-esteem as individuals develop the ability to make global self-evaluations, develop new perspective-taking skills, and begin to perceive themselves more critically (Steiger et al., 2014; Thomaes et al., 2020; Veselska et al., 2009). As a result of these many changes, adolescents begin to evaluate their own self-worth based on external judgments that they perceive others to be making about them.

Other studies have found that self-esteem rises in this transition (Robins et al., 2002). The inconsistencies between increasing and decreasing self-esteem in the transition have been attributed to gender differences (Robins et al., 2002), but they could also suggest that the external factors adolescents are becoming sensitive to—such as parents, teachers, and peers—can contribute to determining whether self-esteem increases or decreases.

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In this transition from childhood to adolescence, self-esteem seems to be unstable and highly sensitive to influence. The distinct drop or rise in self-esteem during this transition, then, can be explained at least partially by the trend that as adolescents begin to rely more on external feedback, the feedback given from peers, family, and authority figures concurrently becomes more critical (Robins et al., 2002; Thomaes et al., 2020). At the same time that adolescents become highly sensitive to others' perceptions of their abilities and worth, others become more expressive about how they view the adolescent. Adolescent self-esteem may be pre-programmed to align with these outside perceptions. Parents, accounting for a high proportion of adolescent social interaction, have a significant impact on the development of self-esteem during this transition (Krauss et al., 2020; Thomaes et al., 2020).

Research has explored the bidirectional relationship between parent praise and adolescent self-esteem, finding that the way parents praise is associated with certain self-esteem outcomes in children (Brummelman et al., 2017; Robins et al., 2002). Additionally, many parents believe that they play an important role in adolescent self-esteem. A 2011 study found that 87% of parents believed that their children needed praise to develop good self-esteem (Brummelman &

Thomaes, 2011; Brummelman et al., 2017). Because parents tend to be so involved and invested in their children's social development—especially at such a critical time in development as adolescence—it is important to consider different kinds of praise and their potential effects.

Parental Praise

There are numerous ways parents can warmly influence their children, such as spending time with them, providing for them, sharing positive emotions, and hugging. These behaviors all contribute to an adolescent's sense of self-worth, but praise, defined as "explicit verbal positive evaluations of another person's products, actions, or traits, where the evaluations are based on the evaluator's subjective standards" (Brummelman et al., 2016, p. 111), is especially relevant during the transition from childhood to adolescence. This is due to the new sensitivity to external feedback adolescents experience (Robins et al., 2002; Thomaes et al., 2020). This paper will focus on the impact that parental praise can have on adolescents.

Praise that *Negatively* Influences Self-Esteem

Research has recognized for decades that criticism, as opposed to praise, can negatively influence self-esteem (Gunderson et al., 2018). Researchers have found that even supportive criticism can have this same effect (Steiger et al., 2014). More recently, research has investigated how self-esteem may be affected by

different forms of praise. Although praise is an important aspect of positive parenting and parental warmth (Krauss et al., 2020; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017), not all praise has the effect of raising self-esteem.

Inflated praise, such as telling an adolescent that their drawing is "incredibly well-done" rather than "well-done," affects adolescents adversely (Brummelman et al., 2016; Brummelman et al., 2017; Gunderson et al., 2018; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017). Inflated praise is often given by parents as an attempt to raise perceived low self-esteem in adolescents (Brummelman et al., 2016; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017). While this may seem like an appropriate reaction to low self-esteem and an effective method for increasing self-esteem, inflated praise actually has the opposite effect. Inflated praise decreases self-esteem because adolescents can sense that inflated praise is exaggerated beyond their true ability. Inflated praise causes adolescents to feel like they must perform "incredibly well" all the time (Brummelman et al., 2016; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017). The same is true for praise that does not match the activity—if a parent overly praises an adolescent for accomplishing an easy task the adolescent recognizes that the praise is not appropriate. They may begin to doubt the praiser's confidence in their ability to accomplish something more difficult (Brummelman et al., 2016; Brummelman et al., 2017; Gunderson et al., 2018; Thomaes et al., 2020). Praise, then, is only truly internalized for good when the praise is consistent with an

adolescent's perception of themselves (Brummelman et al., 2017).

Another form of praise that causes a decrease in self-esteem is person-focused praise. Person praise is praise focused on an individual's abilities rather than their efforts. An example of person praise would be saying, "You are so smart!" in reaction to an adolescent's grade on an assignment. Person praise emphasizes and assigns value to traits out of an adolescent's control, which can discourage an adolescent from making efforts to accomplish their goals (Brummelman et al., 2016; Gunderson et al., 2018). This discouragement happens because if an adolescent believes their worth is based on something they cannot improve, they will find little reason to put effort into it—after all, they believe their efforts will have no effect. Adolescents receiving person praise are more prone to internalize feelings of failure more, attributing it to who they are (fixed) rather than what they have done (temporary). If an adolescent believes that their failure was due to a fixed trait instead of something they can improve, they may think it makes more sense to give up than to keep trying—and they might even conclude that one of their inherent traits is failure (Brummelman et al., 2016). Both person praise and inflated praise lead adolescents ultimately to become driven or discouraged by the desire to avoid losing self-worth more than by their

intrinsic motivation to improve or by personal values (Brummelman et al., 2016; Krauss et al., 2020).

Praise that Positively Influences Self-Esteem

Parental warmth, including verbal feedback such as praise, positively predicts adolescent self-esteem (Krauss et al., 2020). Although parents are not expected to only praise and never criticize their children, studies have shown that the negative effect criticism has on adolescents can be lessened through a ratio where more praise is given than criticism (Butterfield et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2018; Krauss et al., 2020). In other words, parents are not expected to praise exclusively, but giving appropriate praise can help reduce the negative reactions adolescents have to criticism.

As opposed to inflated praise, noninflated praise is accurately aligned with an adolescent's level of success in an activity (Gunderson et al., 2018; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017). For example, when praising an adolescent's drawing, noninflated praise would look like, "This drawing is well-done!" rather than the inflated, "This drawing is incredibly well-done!" (Brummelman et al., 2017). This praise, grounded in reality, leads to better academic and self-esteem outcomes than inflated praise because an adolescent can recognize that the praise is accurate to their perception of reality and thus internalize it positively (Brummelman et al., 2017; Gunderson et al., 2018; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017; Thomaes et al., 2020). Because the adolescent

feels like their parent's praise is aligned with reality, the praise is more meaningful to their perception of self-worth; they can internalize it because they can believe it. Moderately positive, noninflated praise, although it may seem less intuitive, increases self-esteem more than overly positive, inflated praise (Brummelman et al., 2017; Gunderson et al., 2018; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017).

Process praise is focused on adolescents' effort rather than ability for example, praising an adolescent by saying "You worked so hard!" rather than "You are so smart!" (Brummelman et al., 2017). This praise combats helpless behaviors, fosters a growth mindset, and teaches adolescents to develop strategies that can help them face problems throughout their life (Gunderson et al., 2018; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017). This is because adolescents recognize they have the capacity to change. Their self-worth is increased as they feel ownership and autonomy over their success rather than attributing all accomplishments to the possession or lack of fixed traits. Because receiving process praise from a parent encourages adolescents to persist longer, engage with a growth mindset, and perform optimally, adolescents are more likely to maintain and foster feelings of positive self-worth (Brummelman et al., 2016; Gunderson et al., 2018). Praise that is both accurate to reality and emphasizing effort is the most

powerful way to help an adolescent feel capable and truly confident.

Looking Ahead

Studies have explored the importance of self-esteem in early life for obtaining positive outcomes later in life, the fluctuation of self-esteem in adolescence, and how several different forms of praise affect self-esteem adversely or positively (Brummelman et al., 2016; Brummelman et al., 2017; Gunderson et al., 2018; Krauss et al., 2020; Steiger et al., 2014; Tabak & Zawadzka, 2017; Thomaes et al., 2020; Veselska et al., 2009). While previous research has considered the bidirectional relationship between parents' praise and adolescents' self-esteem, it has not yet explored the applications and implications of encouraging change in this relationship (Brummelman et al., 2017; Robins et al., 2002). Research should explore applied programs that aim to find effective ways to teach parents about how to praise their adolescent in ways that will benefit adolescent self-esteem.

Conclusion

The transition from childhood to adolescence is a time where individuals are particularly sensitive to praise or criticism—and correspondingly a time where self-esteem is highly fluctuating (Brummelman et al., 2017; Robins et al., 2002). Negative praise, like criticism or inflated person-praise, decreases self-esteem in adolescents as it leads to the adoption of a fixed mindset

and development of the fear of not being able to live up to high standards. Positive, noninflated process praise increases self-esteem in adolescents as it fosters a growth mindset—grounded in reality—that gives adolescents confidence in their ability to make worthwhile efforts (Brummelman et al., 2016; Brummelman et al., 2017). This literature review highlighted the importance of effective parental praise in regard to increasing adolescent self-esteem and laid the groundwork for future research to identify ways to effectively teach parents how to change the way they talk to adolescent children about their emerging abilities. Ultimately, parents can enhance an essential part of their adolescent’s well-being through something as simple as raising praise.

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