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The Self-Esteem Movement Backfires — When Praise is Dangerous

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The self-esteem movement has transformed much of America, but this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the schools. A brilliant article in *New York Magazine* provides a fascinating glimpse into why the movement is crashing and burning.

As writer Po Bronson explains:

Since the 1969 publication of The Psychology of Self-Esteem, in which Nathaniel Branden opined that self-esteem was the single most important facet of a person, the belief that one must do whatever he can to achieve positive self-esteem has become a movement with broad societal effects. Anything potentially damaging to kids' self-esteem was axed. Competitions were frowned upon. Soccer coaches stopped counting goals and handed out trophies to everyone. Teachers threw out their red pencils. Criticism was replaced with ubiquitous, even undeserved, praise.

Author Melanie Phillips offered a devastating critique of the movement in her book *All Must Have Prizes*. As she revealed, achievement in all areas was being replaced with exercises intended to boost self-esteem. Every player on the team has to receive a prize and all prizes have to be equal. She put it this way in 2003:

Surely, in the immortal words of John McEnroe, they cannot be serious? Alas, the latest pronouncement from those in charge of our exam system is truly beyond satire.

Their new idea for boosting examination success is to abolish the very idea of failure, along with the difference between the right and the wrong answer to a question.

That was in Britain, but the same trends are fully present on this side of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, the point of Bronson's article is that the tide appears to be turning. Take a look at this section:

For a few decades, it's been noted that a large percentage of all gifted students (those who score in the top 10 percent on aptitude tests) severely underestimate their own abilities. Those afflicted with this lack of perceived competence adopt lower standards for success and expect less of themselves. They underrate the importance of effort, and they overrate how much help they need from a parent.

When parents praise their children's intelligence, they believe they are providing the solution to this problem. According to a survey conducted by Columbia University, 85 percent of American parents think it's important to tell their kids that they're smart. In and around the New York area, according to my own (admittedly nonscientific) poll, the number is more like 100 percent. Everyone does it, habitually. The constant praise is meant to be an angel on the shoulder, ensuring that children do not sell their talents short.

But a growing body of research—and a new study from the trenches of the New York public-school system—strongly suggests it might be the other way around. Giving kids the label of "smart" does not prevent them from underperforming. It might actually be causing it.

It seems that a growing body of research indicates that the self-esteem movement, which argued for praising intelligence rather than effort, may be hurting the kids it claims to help. Bronson reports on the research conducted by Carol Dweck, Lisa Blackwell, and Roy Baumeister:

Dweck and Blackwell's work is part of a larger academic challenge to one of the self-esteem movement's key tenets: that praise, self-esteem, and performance rise and fall together. From 1970 to 2000, there were over 15,000 scholarly articles written on self-esteem and its relationship to everything—from sex to career advancement. But results were often contradictory or inconclusive. So in 2003 the Association for Psychological Science asked Dr. Roy Baumeister, then a leading proponent of self-esteem, to review this literature. His team concluded that self-esteem was polluted with flawed science. Only 200 of those 15,000 studies met their rigorous standards.

After reviewing those 200 studies, Baumeister concluded that having high self-esteem didn't improve grades or career achievement. It didn't even reduce alcohol usage. And it especially did not lower violence of any sort. (Highly aggressive, violent people happen to think very highly of themselves, debunking the theory that people are aggressive to make up for low self-esteem.) At the time, Baumeister was quoted as saying that his findings were "the biggest disappointment of my career."

Now he's on Dweck's side of the argument, and his work is going in a similar direction: He will soon publish an article showing that for college students on the verge of failing in class, esteem-building praise causes their grades to sink further. Baumeister has come to believe the continued appeal of self-esteem is largely tied to parents' pride in their children's achievements: It's so strong that "when they praise their kids, it's not that far from praising themselves."

More:

New York University professor of psychiatry Judith Brook explains that the issue for parents is one of credibility. "Praise is important, but not vacuous praise," she says. "It has to be based on a real thing—some skill or talent they have." Once children hear praise they interpret as meritless, they discount not just the insincere praise, but sincere praise as well.

Scholars from Reed College and Stanford reviewed over 150 praise studies. Their meta-analysis determined that praised students become risk-averse and lack perceived autonomy. The scholars found consistent correlations between a liberal use of praise and students' "shorter task persistence, more eye-checking with the teacher, and inflected speech such that answers have the intonation of questions."

Dweck's research on overpraised kids strongly suggests that image maintenance becomes their primary concern—they are more competitive and more interested in tearing others down. A raft of very alarming studies illustrate this.

The article indicates that older children and teenagers learn to become cynical about the undeserved praise they receive from parents, teachers, and others. They actually perform better if they receive serious and skilled *criticism*, rather than empty praise.

The article is a must-read for parents, teachers, and all concerned with the culture around us. The article is devastating to the self-esteem movement, but encouraging to all who hope for a recovery of cultural sanity — at least on this one significant point. Praising effort and achievement yields positive results. Praising for the sake of praising hurts far more than it helps. It is a recipe for individual and social disaster.

