

<b>Title</b>	The wrong type of praise
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<b>Audience</b>	Parents and Coaches
<b>Background</b>	This document is based upon the author's personal opinion and is not a scientific study. Hopefully it stimulates some debate and internal reflection amongst readers.

## **The Research**

In 1998 a Stamford Psychologist called Carol Dweck did a series of experiments with 11 year old students. All of the students were given a series of puzzles as a test. At the end of the test they were given their scores and then one of two different sets of feedback. Half of the students were praised for effort "You worked really hard" and half for their intelligence "You must be really smart".

Dweck was interested in analysing people's mindset and was trying to establish whether words could be used to affect whether you had an open mind or a closed mind. She then wanted to establish whether these different mindsets affected future performance.

The students were offered another batch of tests and had the choice of easy or hard puzzles. Two thirds of the "smart" students chose the easy tests whilst 90% of the "Effort" students chose the difficult puzzles. Dweck found that the "smart" students didn't want to lose their smart tag by failing the next test so they chose the easy option, whereas the hard working students didn't care about the results, they just wanted to work hard again.

Next the students were given a really difficult test that neither would succeed at. The smart students determined that they were no good at these puzzles after all and quit quite quickly, whereas the hard working students stuck at it for longer before giving up.

Dweck then gave all of the students an easy test similar to the 1<sup>st</sup> one that they all did. The "Smart" students performance went down by 20% compared to the first test scores whereas the "hard workers" results improved by 30%, their failure in the last test had made them more determined this time around! Dweck did the same test multiple times in multiple areas of the country and the results were always the same.

**Conclusion:** Praising intelligence harms motivation and future performance.

Talent Orientated praise creates subliminal messages that result in a change in mindset next time around. For example, "You learned that so quickly, you're really smart" creates the subliminal message "If I don't learn quickly then I am no longer smart" and will cause a change in attitude and performance next time you are asked to learn something.

## **How does this relate to Young Athletes?**

In one of my earlier Blogs I explained about the 10,000 hour rule. In summary, this research showed that to be world class in any subject takes at least 10,000 hours of practice.

If we then align this alongside the findings from Dweck's study then you will see how developing a closed minded athlete will result in them giving up well before the 10,000 hour mark.

We often see promising young athletes getting upset when they don't win a race that they expected to do well in. Disappointment isn't a bad thing IF it makes them more determined to come back and do better next time (and clock up more hours of practice).

However, if that athlete has previously been singled out as a star or prodigy by their coach or parents, as the "Smart" kids were in Dweck's experiments then their disappointing performance is more likely to result in them refusing to try hard next time.

I often come across athletes that expect success. Perhaps they have come to the club after winning the school sports day or perhaps they won their last race for the club. Self confidence is good, if it is channelled at the right time and in the right way. If it isn't then it often results in tears.

### **What should you do?**

Instead of praising the performance, praise the athletes effort.

"great win, you were so fast" should be replaced with "well done, you tried really hard"

This also works really well for athletes that didn't win and it opens the door for coaches to then give feedback on what went well and what they need to work on in training.

By heaping praise on athletes you run the risk of them thinking they are the finished product. Unless they have just become World Champion then this is unlikely and there will always be something to work on in training.

### **What shouldn't you do?**

Whilst it isn't part of Dweck's study, I would also flag at this point that negative feedback or coaching points are best given cold. By that I mean that analysing and criticising performance should be avoided straight after a race / event. Emotions are still running high (positive or negative) so feedback is often misinterpreted or misunderstood. I also feel that it is also much less likely to be remembered. Wherever possible, analysis of performance should come from the athlete and is teased out by asking open questions such as "How effectively do you feel that you used your arms during that Long Jump?"

### **Further Reading / References**

Bounce by Matthew Syed

Mindset by Carol Dweck

