

Study indicates when parents should shower children with praise

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By CNN

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When it comes to praising your child for their actions, parents walk a fine line between being helpful or harmful to their child's development.

"To foster a growth mindset, you should use more process-based praise, such as 'Great job trying! I could see how much effort you put into that,' versus person-based praise such as 'That's great, you're a really good artist,' said Julia Leonard, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University.

Person-based praise has been shown to backfire because it can send the wrong message to a child, "suggesting they have some sort of inherent set of abilities, and so they feel more rigid and don't want to mess up," she said.

But praise wins the gold when compared to boring instruction, at least when it comes to dental hygiene, according to a new study by Leonard and her team. You can't go wrong if you say "good job!" when your child successfully brushes their own teeth, according to the study, which published Tuesday in the journal *Child Development*.

"Our study does suggest that praise can be a really positive feature of parenting that can help kids build healthy habits," said Leonard adding that the study demonstrated a new approach to studying a child's healthy development.

"Instead of focusing on what factors make one group of children different from another, our study asked which factors make individual children more like the best version of themselves," Leonard said.

The study followed 81 three-year-olds just learning to brush their teeth. Parents were required to video their child's tooth-brushing endeavours for 16 nights, hitting record as they handed the brush to their child and pushing stop when they took it back.

That allowed researchers to capture all of the parent's praise -- "Well done! Good job!" -- and instructional endeavours, such as "Brush the backs of your teeth," and "Hey, don't stop, you're not done

yet." Some parents got creative in the process, researchers said, by singing or doing role plays to encourage their child's efforts.

After uploading the videos, parents were told to score their child's mood (extremely bad to extremely good) and their own stress levels during the nightly endeavour. Those scores ranged from a scale of 0 (easy-peasy) to 10 (I'm pulling all their teeth out now).

The findings? A child's toothbrushing success was directly related to the level of praise in the parent's talk. Children brushed longer on days when their parents used more praise and less instruction, the study found.

"Our work is the first to show that fluctuations in parent praise relate to fluctuations in child persistence," said study author Allyson Mackey, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, in a statement.

However, the study could not show a direct cause and effect, only an association, Leonard stressed.

"We don't know that praise causes kids to brush longer. We just know it's associated with more brushing," she said.

More research is needed, the authors said, to see if the study's findings could be applied to other tasks that require a child's persistence.

In the meantime, parents, here's the takeaway: If you've got some rising toddlers in your home that need to learn to brush their teeth, don't worry. It's just fine to praise them. (But it doesn't count if you brush their teeth for them. OK?)

