

# Praising A<sup>+</sup> Achievement

**Strategies for Developing Your Children's Confidence** *by Susan Howell*



**Sometimes the way we communicate our approval of our children reflects the gender stereotypes of our culture.**

"I made an A on my math exam!" your child exclaims.

"Great! You are so talented!" you respond. Or you might say, "That studying really paid off. You've worked hard!" On the surface, both sound like compliments. Both congratulate the child on a job well done. Both convey your pride. Yet, they are different in ways we often do not recognize.

The first response praises a quality that is inborn and not subject to change—something that is part of the essence of

who the child is. An inborn quality is likely to endure and be replicated the next time she or he takes an exam.

The second response praises something the child has done in a given situation—something requiring intentionality—rather than an inborn quality the child possesses. Putting forth effort is changeable depending on the situation, as well as the energy and time one has for any given endeavor.

The fact is, success most often hinges on both inborn talent and hard work, and neither response usually triggers an adverse reaction—unless the child consistently hears one message without enough of the other.

In their research on achievement motivation in boys and girls, Raty and colleagues (2002) found that parents are more likely to attribute their son's success in math to his talent or ability, and their daughter's success in math to hard work. This could communicate that his success is more likely to be repeated because it's a part of who he *is*, with hers being less certain since it's a part of what she *does*.

What's more, when a son does poorly in math, parents are more likely to blame lack of effort. But, with a daughter, mothers tend to blame both lack of effort and task difficulty (Raty, 2002). This again reflects less confidence in the daughters' chance for success, since lack of effort can be remedied by simply trying harder, but task difficulty is relatively unchangeable. After all, if you aren't good enough to master the task today, you probably won't be able to master it tomorrow either. Believing the task is simply too difficult might also contribute to passivity for these young females, letting others handle the difficult subjects, the hard questions, the tough issues.

Cultural stereotypes appear to weigh in, too, since research shows that parents believe their daughters have more talent in music (Fredricks, Simpkins, & Eccles, 2005) and reading ability (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003) than their sons. Parents' expectations seem to reflect the gender stereotypes of our culture, even when objective research shows no difference in skill level between the genders (Helgeson, 2012).

Do these biases influence the child's perceptions? Research says yes. Neuenschwander and colleagues (2007) found that adult perception seems to influence how children perceive themselves. Therefore, concern that girls and boys will learn to feel less certain of success when pursuing activities outside of gender stereotypes seems warranted.

In teaching a gender studies course at a Christian university, I have found that once my students learn of these biases, they begin noticing them among their friends and family members and are surprised they haven't noticed them before. They often report that they want to be more intentional about the way they communicate, so they will foster, rather than undermine, others' confidence and success.

I believe it's the same for most parents. We typically do not set out to make it difficult for our children to believe in their own success. We don't want our daughters to feel less confident in math and science or for our sons to believe they have less ability in reading. And to be fair, we probably shouldn't want our sons or daughters to focus exclusively on their abilities and talents, without due attention to hard work and effort. We want to help, not hinder, their confidence in themselves and their work ethic.

So, let's look at how we can praise and encourage our children in ways that will optimize their confidence in future success.

**1 Know your child's talents and abilities.** Notice when something seems to come easily for them, and encourage them to pursue activities where they show natural ability. Be careful, however, to note their actual abilities rather than assuming talents stereotypic to their gender. Don't assume your daughter will be good with children and your son will be able to fix any and all broken gadgets. They might have abilities that are in line with our culture's gender roles; they might not. Your daughter might be an exceptional athlete; your son might be the one to ask to make a special dessert for a family get-together.

**2 Know where your child struggles.** Notice the areas where your child seems to be challenged and wants to give up. In areas where greater effort is warranted (e.g., learning to read, being assertive with peers), encourage children to make the effort necessary to succeed. Provide direction and advice in areas where you can. Model strategies that work for you. Connect them with tutors or peers who can help when you don't feel capable yourself.

One word of caution, however: The way you help children can also communicate your confidence, or lack of confidence, in their abilities. One study found that parents were controlling when helping their daughters with homework, communicating the child's inability to do it on her own. Although parents used the same techniques with their sons, they also utilized autonomy-granting assistance which communicates his ability to do the work on his own (Pomerantz & Ruble, 1998).

When children are stressed and overwhelmed with homework, or confused about how to work the problem or write the essay, it's easy for us to want to fix the situation—just tell them the answer or give them a topic for the paper, etc. While this solves the immediate issue, it takes responsibility for learning away from the children, communicating their inability to “get it” themselves. The point isn't to simply finish the homework as much as it is to understand the underlying concept so it can be applied to the next homework assignment, the next exam, the next life situation.

A better approach might be to ask children to describe where they are struggling, talk through what they were told in class or read in the text, and help them to come to the answer themselves. When this works, they will be more confident tackling future challenges. When help is needed, it should build, not weaken, children's confidence.

**3 Remember too that not every child needs to succeed in every area.** In areas that are not crucial, accept your child's limitations. Your child simply may not have the ability to become a concert pianist, with or without all the effort he or she can muster. Respect that.

**4 Pause to examine what you are already communicating to your children.** The next time you comment on your son's or your daughter's success, take a moment and think what that comment will communicate. Would your comment be different if you were talking to a child of the other sex? Focus on tailoring your comments to the situation rather than the gender of the child. Sometimes the pause and thought are all that are needed to steer us in the right direction.

**5 Learn about how you usually respond by simply asking your child.** When your child gets the lead in the school play, ask them, "What do you think? Was it effort? Natural talent? Or some of both?" Listen to what they say. You can get a feel for what they think about themselves and an idea of what you, and others in their life, have communicated thus far.

**6 Praise the gifts you see in your child.** Specifically identify in them characteristics you admire that seem to be part of who they are naturally. "You are so observant." "I love listening to you sing." "Your sense of humor is wonderful!" These comments communicate appreciation for an ability that will likely surface again and again across a variety of contexts.

**7 Praise the effort expended.** Sometimes adults forget how overwhelming it is to tackle geometry for the first time or how pressure-filled it is to make friends in a new school. Children need to know that their efforts are noticed and appreciated, regardless of the level of success those efforts have produced.

**8 Keep in mind that even tasks requiring effort might uncover hidden talents.** Likewise, having talent rarely means preparation isn't necessary. Just because he

has to practice a lot doesn't mean your son has no natural athletic ability. She might be at the top of her class in algebra, but homework is still important. Praising talent while applauding commitment to practice is one way to communicate the importance of both.

**9 Remember that while you are likely the most significant influence for your child's confidence, you are not the only influence.** Your child's friends and teachers, television, movies, and books all communicate about gender and achievement in powerful ways. Monitor the media messages your child is exposed to, and, depending on the age, limit them and/or talk openly with your child about those messages and their dangers. Pay attention to what your child seems to be hearing at school. When appropriate, pass along information (like this article!) to your child's teachers to increase their awareness.

In conclusion, most parents want for their children to be successful and to believe in themselves. Yet research shows that the way we communicate with our children often discourages their confidence in future success when they venture outside of gender-stereotyped endeavors. Depending on whether we attribute their success to a stable ability or to the unstable expenditure of effort, we communicate our confidence in their future success. Since children often take cues from parents, we would do well to be intentional in moving beyond stereotyped expectations, appreciating the abilities our children possess as well as the work ethic we hope they develop.



Susan Howell, EdD, is professor of psychology at Campbellsville University, where she teaches classes in gender, development, and the integration of psychology with faith. Susan has written for CBE publications, professional journals, and several devotional magazines.

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