

What's Wrong with Smart?

In this diverse country of ours it's extraordinary for 85% of people to agree on anything. Yet 85% of people agree that it's important to tell their kids they're smart. Kids, we have been told, need to hear that they're smart to help them develop high self-esteem, and high self-esteem is held to be essential for school success. Clearly, telling kids they're smart has come to be an important part of child-rearing for legions of loving parents. Unfortunately, telling kids often and enthusiastically that they're smart turns out to do more harm than good.

What, exactly, is wrong with trying to help our kids succeed by convincing them that they're smart? Well, for one thing, it doesn't seem to work. American students, who have been so encouraged to identify themselves as smart, turn out to work less hard and perform less well than kids in many other countries, so telling kids they're smart seems not to be producing school success..

One reason for this seems to be that, without meaning to, we are telling kids that “smart” is a quality that you either have or you don't. Rona may tell her daughter, Katie, “You're smart”, but what Katie hears is “I have smartness.” In other words, we are teaching kids that you're either born smart and will succeed in school, or you're not and you won't.

Since “smart” is obviously something parents value highly, and since kids dread the possibility of losing a parent's love and respect, Katie starts to feel that it is crucial to keep her reputation as “smart.” This may lead her to do things that actually interfere with her education. For example, she may choose the course with the “easy A”, rather than the one in which she'll really learn something new. She may simply give up the first time she experiences the slightest doubt that she is indeed smart, because, if she's not smart, there's no point in trying. She might even cheat because the most important thing is to get the grade which will keep her looking smart, no matter what it takes.

By communicating to kids that “smart” is both all-important and inborn, we have forgotten all the kinds of “smart”, and all the kinds of success, that have to do with working hard, putting in time, trying new strategies, asking for help, making mistakes and a great deal else. In fact, many kids end up feeling that studying hard, getting help, making mistakes, and so forth, actually mean that they're not smart, because, if they really were smart, learning would be quick and easy.

The not-so-welcome reality is that true learning is often neither quick nor easy. In fact, it is often slow and frustrating, though it can also be satisfying, exciting and empowering. Therefore, rather than simply telling our kids they're “smart”, we need to help them in other ways. We have to help them develop skills such as the ability to sustain effort, to tolerate frustration, and to solve problems. We have to help them to view learning as not just something one does at school because one has to, but as a source of enrichment and enjoyment. We have to make sure that our kids know that we love and value them for all sorts of reasons, and not simply for being “smart.” It is through messages like these that we help to create people who can both tolerate the frustrations of intellectual effort on and enjoy its satisfactions. These are the qualities that pave the way to more likely and more authentic success in school, and, even more important, in life..

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