

Julie Roys Commentary

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Ironically, the secret to raising smart kids is never to tell them that they are. So says Carol S. Dweck, a Stanford University professor and one of the country's leading research psychologists.

Praising children for their intelligence, Dweck says, actually predisposes them to failure. It causes them to posit their self-worth in their intellect and to view intelligence as something innate and fixed. This, research shows, can lead to a number of unintended and undesired consequences.

These children, for example, tend to become lazy in school. After all, their success is predetermined, so why exert any effort? They also view challenges as threats to their egos. Any mistake may reveal they're not as smart as everyone thinks, so they avoid failure at all cost. These children may coast through their early grades when schoolwork is easy. But, when school becomes more difficult, they often give up.

Given these facts, Dweck proposes something truly radical: rather than praising kids for their abilities, encourage them to develop character qualities like hard work and persistence. Teach them that intelligence can be developed through education and effort. And, don't blame failure on a lack of aptitude or bad circumstances; instead, encourage children to take responsibility for their performance and to look for ways to improve. People almost always perform better, she says, when they focus on things they can control, rather than on things they cannot.

The results of adopting this so-called "growth mindset" are stunning. Dweck and a colleague followed nearly 400 students through their junior high school years. Those who believed their intelligence was fixed declined in their test scores over a two-year period. They became what Dweck calls "helpless" learners. But, those who believed intelligence was malleable adopted a "mastery mindset," increasing their test scores and developing a sizeable performance gap between the two groups.

So, it appears all the self-esteem gurus have been wrong. They've been encouraging parents to tell Johnny how talented he is, but now studies are supporting a basic truth revealed in

Scripture. It's not our talents that make us successful; it's our character. And, character is not an innate and static quality. It's actually something that increases as we pursue it.

In Second Peter, the apostle admonishes us to “make every effort to add to (our) faith goodness; and to goodness knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance, and to perseverance, godliness. . .” If we possess these qualities in increasing measure, Peter says, we'll avoid being “ineffective” and “unproductive.”

We live in a culture that worships talent and this value has permeated our parenting. Some 85-percent of parents in one survey said they believe it's important to praise kids' intelligence so they'll feel smart. But, I think we'd help them more – and act more biblically – if we'd praise their virtue instead. That's my view. For Moody Radio, I'm Julie Roys.