



READ THIS

DON'T CALL THEM GIFTED!

If you want to help children learn then here are some phrases to AVOID saying:

The child is a genius!

You're gifted

Bright boy

Clever girl

You're a natural

What a great reader

You're by far the best

Arguably, this chapter contains the most important lessons for helping children learn. So, as the arrow opposite says, read this ...



JMP

If we tell children they are gifted, bright, clever, a natural or any of the other labels listed on page 59, then we are in danger of suggesting their success is down to a 'natural' intelligence they have been given. On the face of it, this might be okay, but consider what these same children might think if they begin to fail: 'I can't be as clever, bright or gifted as I thought I was.' And: 'If my success is down to my level of intelligence, then surely my failures must be down to the same thing.'

As I will show you in this chapter, it is far better to use phrases such as:

'The child has some great ideas!' (not *'the child is a genius'*)

'You're making wonderful progress!' (not *'you're gifted'*)

'Bright idea!' (not *'bright boy'*)

'Clever suggestion!' (not *'clever girl'*)

'Great skill' (not *'you're a natural'*)

'What great reading!' (not *'what a great reader'*)

All of the positive phrases focus on actions and thinking. They tell children that success (and therefore also failure) is due to behaviour. And of course behaviour is much easier to modify than intelligence is.

One way to decide which way to praise is to consider what the children might say to themselves if they begin to struggle. For example, if we say 'clever children' when they are doing well then how many of them might suspect that they are 'stupid children' when the going gets tough? Whereas if we say 'clever idea' then, even in their darkest moments, they are only going to end up saying they've had a 'stupid idea' (which seems less damning than 'I am stupid'.)

Which 'type' best describes you?

Type F

You know you can learn new things but that won't really change how intelligent you are.

There are some things you have always been good at and other things you'll never be able to do.

There are some people you know who are naturally gifted.

Type G

You believe that the more you learn, the more intelligent you become.

You think you've developed your talents through your own endeavours, and that your weaknesses are just waiting to be improved.

You think the people who excel at certain things do so because of all their dedication and effort.

If your thinking is more in line with Type F then please, please, please read the following few pages very carefully because this type of thinking leads to behaviour that often gets in the way of learning.

If your thinking is more in line with Type G, then great – but don't rest on your laurels just yet! We're all prone to using phrases that don't help learning. So read on ...

NB. On page 65, I explain the significance of 'Type F' and 'Type G' (rather than Type 'A' or 'B'.)

When people believe that their intelligence is more or less constant throughout their lives then this can cause them to:

- Worry about how much intelligence they have.
- Focus on showing that they are more intelligent than others.
- Choose to do things that are easy for them so that they look clever.
- Avoid any setback or challenge, or try to steer clear of people whom they perceive to be more intelligent.

These behaviours would be typical of 'Type F' people, as identified on the previous page.

However, when people believe that intelligence is not something they merely possess but something that can be enhanced through learning, then they tend to:

- Focus on learning and improving.
- Choose things that will stretch and challenge them.
- Seek ways to put their knowledge to good use.
- Look for what they can learn from mistakes, and from more proficient people.

These behaviours would be typical of 'Type G' people, although please note that type G people don't deny there are differences between how much people know or how quickly they seem to master something. It's just that they focus on the idea that everyone can learn, given the right coaching, support, effort and time. Type F people, however, tend to focus on determining who is the smartest.

'It has become a common practice to praise students for their performance on easy tasks, to tell them they are smart when they do something quickly and perfectly. When we do this we are not teaching them to welcome challenge and learn from errors. We are teaching them that easy success means they are intelligent and, by implication, that errors and effort mean they are not.'

Carol Dweck, 2000 (Professor of Psychology, Stanford University)¹⁵

Fixed and Growth Mindsets

Carol Dweck, upon whose work I draw deeply and with whom I had the great pleasure of working in June 2010, has researched this topic in depth in her role as Professor of Psychology at Stanford University. She has found that some people believe their success is based on innate ability, and says these people have a *fixed* theory of intelligence. Other people believe their success is based on hard work and learning. Dweck says these people have a *growth* or incremental theory of intelligence.

From the previous pages, Type F are those with a fixed mindset, whereas Type G are those with a growth mindset.

We might not necessarily be aware of our own mindset. However, our behaviour, our thinking and our comments tend to give us away.

Take a look at your answers to the questionnaire on page 32. If you answered with more a's and b's on questions 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 or c's and d's on the even numbered questions then you may well have a fixed mindset.

As Dweck shows clearly in her books *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, (2006) and *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development* (1999), and I show over the next few pages, a growth mindset is far more likely to improve learning, and thus to help children learn.

Fixed Mindset

These are the typical beliefs and attitudes of people with a Fixed Mindset

Beliefs

- Intelligence and ability are **fixed**.
- **Nature** determines intelligence and ability.
- I will always be good at some things (eg maths) and poor at other things (eg art).

Priorities

- **Prove** myself.
- Succeed, especially with little effort, as this proves I am clever.
- Avoid failure of any sort.

Responses to Challenges

- Blame myself or, to protect my ego, blame someone else.
- **Feel inferior** or incapable.
- Try guessing the answers or copying others.
- Seek ego-boosting distractions.

Mottos

- Either you're good at something or you're not.
- If you're really good at something, you shouldn't need to try.
- **If you have to try, you must be stupid.**
- Don't try too hard; that way you've got an excuse if things go wrong.
- No pain, no pain!

Growth Mindset

These are the typical beliefs and attitudes of people with a Growth Mindset

Beliefs

- Intelligence and ability can **grow**.
- **Nurture** determines intelligence and ability.
- If I apply myself more, seek help, take risks, change my strategy, then I've got a good chance of learning anything.

Priorities

- Improve myself.
- Learn through challenge, as this will help me to grow my talents.
- Seek interesting challenges that will stretch and help me to learn.

Responses to Challenges

- There is no blame – I just want to know how to do it better next time.
- Feel inspired to have a go.
- Try various problem-solving strategies.
- Seek advice, support or new strategies.

Mottos

- Success comes with application.
- No matter how good you are at something, you can always improve.
- **If you have to try, you must be learning.**
- Always try hard; that way you've more chance of success and making progress.
- No pain, no gain!

A Connection Between Mindset and Praise

One of the best introductions to Dweck's work comes from an article she wrote with Claudia Mueller for the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1998. In it they describe a series of six tests they did to discover the effect of praise on children's performance.¹⁶

The first test involved 128 fifth graders (70 girls and 58 boys, aged 10–12 years). Each child was seen individually by one of four experimenters. After being escorted from their usual classroom to an empty one, they were introduced to the task. They were given a brief guide to problem solving and then asked to solve 10 moderately difficult questions in four minutes.

As soon as the time was up, the adult marked their tests and told the child he/she had done well:

'Wow, you did very well on these problems. You got [number of problems] right. That's a really high score.'

Regardless of their actual score, all children were told that they had solved at least 80% of the questions they had answered.

Each child then received one of three types of praise, as follows:

Approximately one-third of the children were given **Intelligence Praise** – they were told they had done well ‘because they were clever’.

Approximately one-third of the children were given **Process Praise** – they were told they had done well ‘because they had tried hard.’

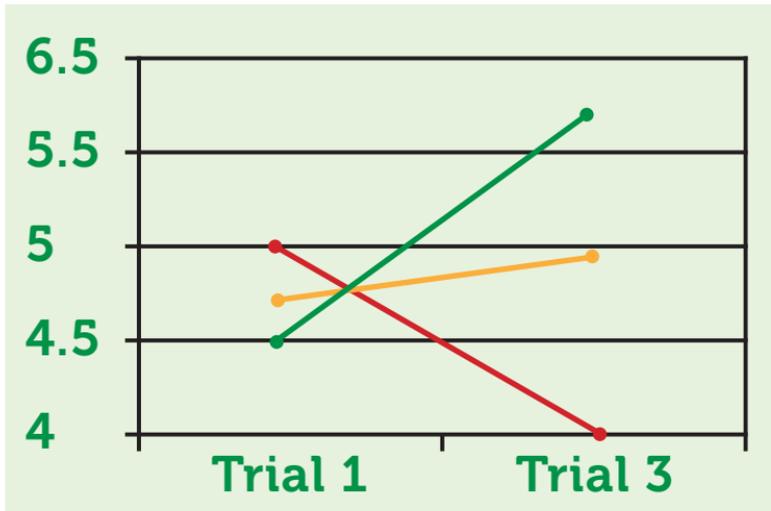
Approximately one-third of the children were the **control group** – they were told they had done well but given no further explanation as to why.

Each child was then given another test, this time far more difficult. Every child struggled.

They were then told they had performed ‘a lot worse’ on the second test than on the first test.*

After receiving this negative feedback, each child was asked to work on the third and final set of problems. These were of the same standard as the first set (moderate difficulty) so it could be reasonably expected that each child would have got the same score as they had on the first test. Except they didn’t.

The graph over the page shows how the children’s scores changed from the first set of problems to the third set of problems, after receiving the different types of praise.



The numbers down the left show the average score out of 10 achieved by the groups of children.

Red Line – children who received **intelligence praise**

Green Line – children who received **process praise**

Orange Line – children in the **control group**

As you will see from the graph:

The children who were praised for being **clever** did **worse** on the third test than they had on the first test.

The children who were praised for having **tried hard** did **better** on the third test than they had on the first test.

The children in the **control group** did **slightly better** over time, probably because they were getting used to taking the tests.

I often quote this research when I'm giving a keynote address at conferences. After presenting the graph, I ask volunteers to suggest reasons why praising children for being clever could have such a negative impact. The most common suggestions are:

If children are told they are clever, they might then rest on their laurels.

When the children struggled in the second test, those who had been praised for being clever might have questioned whether they had been lied to about being clever.

There is a common assumption that if you are clever then you should never struggle. Thus, when the children struggled with the second test, they decided they were not clever.

Those children who believed they were clever decided the tests were stupid and that they did not need to prove themselves.

'Clever' children are more likely to suspect the test is a trick used to catch them out.

Children who receive intelligence praise feel threatened by tasks they can't do and so give up, whereas children who get process praise often feel prompted to try even harder.

All these suggestions are likely to have some truth to them, particularly as they are based mainly on experienced teachers' and parents' observations of how 'clever' children respond to success and failure.

I would add one more to the list: the differing degrees to which children believe they can make the changes necessary to improve their performance.

When the children given intelligence praise struggled in the second test, what strategies were open to them? Unless they could whip out a bigger brain or take an intelligence pill, they may well have believed they were powerless to improve their scores.

Conversely, those children who had been praised for effort presumably thought: 'I must try harder', since that is what they had been told generates high scores.

To be successful in learning, children need to know that their actions influence outcomes. They should realise that they've succeeded *because* of their efforts, not just because they were 'given' the ability by their genes.

***Note about the test conditions**

'During the debriefing given at the end of the experimental session, all children were informed that the second problem set contained problems of increased difficulty, which were considered to be appropriate for older, seventh-grade students. In fact, they were told that answering even one of these difficult problems was quite an achievement for students in their grade level. Thus, they were assured of the overall high quality of their task performance. Extensive precautions were taken to ensure that all children left the experimental setting proud of their performance.' Mueller & Dweck, 1998¹⁷

This is where the key to positive praise lies:

If we praise children for something they have control over (effort, focus, determination and so on) then we empower them to learn and grow.

If we praise them for something they assume they been 'given' (such as cleverness, a 'natural' talent, a gift, and so on) then we may inadvertently cause them to believe they have no influence over their successes and failures.

Supporting the conclusions from this research does not mean I am a parent who is impossible to please, or one that never gives praise for fear of spoiling the child.

Interestingly, most parents seem to accept that it is much better to criticise bad behaviour than it is to criticise their child. Saying 'that was a naughty thing to do' is far more preferable than saying 'you're a naughty child.' I would say it works the same way with praise: it is better to say 'that was a clever thing to do' than to say 'you're a clever child.'

Children who believe their successes are due to their own efforts and endeavours tend to be more willing to learn.

Children who believe their successes are due to 'being clever' are more inclined to show off what they know and to stick to activities they know they can excel at.

Over the next few pages you will find a further exploration of praise. If you have any questions, please post them on encouraginglearning.com and I will endeavour to answer them as best as I can.

Here you are, son,
we got you a gift...
a bigger brain!



'One of the most damaging aspects of the 'gift' mentality is that it makes us think we can know in advance who has the gift. This, I believe, is what makes us try to identify groups who have it and groups who don't – as in, 'boys have it and girls don't, or those who show early promise have it and others don't.'

Dweck, 2012¹⁸

What's Wrong With Gifts?

In April 2010, I was heading for my plane home from Copenhagen when ash from an Icelandic volcano forced the closure of the airport. For 10 hours I sat in one of the lounges and waited. Opposite me was a father and a son. The boy can't have been more than four or five years old, and yet for the whole 10 hours they played chess.

Unusual though this might be, my point is that I bet there are a number of teachers, parents, or classmates at the boy's school who refer to him as being a *gifted* chess player. Despite the (presumably) hundreds of hours he has spent learning to play the game, all the effort, all the challenges, he is referred to as gifted – as if he was *given* his talent.

You see, 'gifts' suggest that a person's ability has been bestowed upon them. It disregards all the blood, sweat

and tears that have been shed in developing the talent; the hundreds of hours that the boy spent playing chess; the dedication and practice Tiger Woods has put into his golf; the trial and error Evelyn Glennie went through to teach herself how to 'feel' rather than hear music.

I'm not saying that 'gift' or 'gifted' are bad words but I would suggest, as my friend and colleague Professor Barry Hymer advises, that you think in terms of 'gift-creation.'¹⁹ By this he means it is better to help children *grow* gifts rather than pouring our energies into identifying and labelling their gifts. Or, as he so beautifully put it in an email to a friend:

'What drives us in our society to pin children to their measured competencies, like so many dried and mounted butterflies? Let's enjoy their colours, not measure them. Let's not pin them down – let's watch them in flight.'

Barry Hymer, 2007

Gifts from God

I realise many people believe our talents are indeed gifts from God. When I was younger many of my more religious friends would encourage me to remark that we are *blessed*, not lucky, when things go our way.

However, I don't think this viewpoint is necessarily in opposition to a *growth* view of praise. After all, isn't there a duty to make the most of our gifts or to 'honour God' by nurturing and using wisely the gifts He has given us?

My Child Really *Is* a Genius

After I'd made a presentation to parents at a school near Bondi Beach recently, a mother approached me and boasted: 'My son's a genius.' Apparently, her son was working at the level of children five years his senior and was achieving perfect scores in several subjects.

The next day, I met her son, who was eight. Despite this, he had apparently read as many books in his short life as I had in my whole childhood. Perhaps he was a genius after all?

But then the lesson began.

As the children and I wondered why it was okay to make up stories but not to tell lies, the boy became increasingly agitated. He resented not knowing the 'right' answer before anyone else and responded to every question as if it were a personal criticism. Before long, he was trying out all sorts of distracting behaviour, hoping to bring the lesson back to the safe territory of facts and right or wrong answers.

After the lesson, I found out some background information. He is an only child living with two parents and four grandparents. He has a voracious appetite for knowledge, perhaps created, but certainly encouraged, by the adults in his life. The only out-of-school activities he does are fact-based – no sports clubs, social activities or music lessons. Of course, far be it for me to say how he should spend his time – but that's not the question. The question is whether the boy is a genius or not, or even whether geniuses exist.

This reminds me of another encounter I had in Australia. I was working with a primary school near Melbourne when one of the teachers remarked that none of his Vietnamese pupils could catch a ball, even by the time they left school aged 11. I asked why he thought this might be, to which he replied: 'Perhaps it's something genetic?'

'What's their level of English like?' I asked. 'Better than any of our Aussie kids!' he replied. 'How about their maths?' 'Oh, I reckon they're geniuses – the lot of them.'

Can this really be true: that Vietnamese children growing up in Australia are all blessed with numeracy and literacy genes but no sporting genes? Or might it have something to do with spending most of their waking hours on extra study, attending Vietnamese school at weekends, and having parents who are determined to ensure their children make the most of the opportunities their new country presents? I know it's almost abhorrent to an Aussie that a child wouldn't have any interest in sport but there are only so many hours in the day, and if these are spent studying then there's not a lot of time for games.

Don't get me wrong – I'm not making fun of Australia. I delight in working with the warm and fantastically friendly people I find there. Perhaps it's their honesty and self-deprecating humour that allows me to unearth more stories than I typically find in other, more reserved, countries.

The Mindset of Boys vs. Girls

It might not surprise you to know that boys tend to receive more criticism than girls – as much as eight times more, according to Dweck.²⁰

However, what you might find more surprising is that girls tend to suffer more because of it.

Allow me to explain: I do a lot of work with pre-schools. Whenever I visit these wonderful places of learning, I can't help noticing that the girls are more likely to be engaged in nice, neat, tidy, social play – and being praised for it – whereas the boys are more likely to be making a mess or being rough with each other – and being criticised for it.

This doesn't happen only in pre-schools but it does tend to be more pronounced there. I guess this is because young girls are typically more advanced linguistically, socially and emotionally than boys of the same age. Of course this isn't always the case but *typically* it is.

So, whilst the girls are being told: 'clever girl', 'good girl', 'what a beautiful picture', the boys are being told:

'John – if only you could sit still for a minute and listen then you'd do much better.'

'Paul – if you put as much effort into your work as you do into messing about then you could really achieve.'

'Ringo – as for you, young man, you need to focus more! I'm fed up of repeating myself for your sake.'

Notice what the boys are being told – if you concentrate more, try harder, listen better, then you will do better. These are *growth mindset* messages. It is a pity they come in the form of criticism but, nonetheless, they are *growth* messages.

Girls, on the other hand, are being praised into developing a fixed mindset through terms such as clever, bright, good, and so on.

Of course these are generalisations. There are many girls with a *growth mindset* and many boys with a *fixed mindset*; the point is that children develop a particular mindset due in part to the praise and encouragement they receive.

So, if we want children to develop a growth mindset, and that would seem the best choice if we want children to be learners, then we need to think about what and how we praise.

‘Confusion is a common occurrence in maths and science, where, unlike most verbal areas, new material often involves completely new skills, concepts, or conceptual systems. So we created a new task for students to learn, and for half of the students we placed some confusing material near the beginning.

What we found was that bright girls didn't cope at all well with this confusion. In fact, the higher the girl's IQ, the worse she did. Many high IQ girls were unable to learn the material after experiencing confusion. This didn't happen to boys. For them, the higher their IQ, the better they learned. The confusion only energized them. Since our high IQ girls had done wonderfully well when they didn't bump up against difficulty, what we're looking at here isn't a difference in ability, but a difference in how students cope with experiences that may call their ability into question - whether they feel challenged by them or demoralized by them.’ (Dweck, 2006)

Comparing test scores

	Jan
C1	95
C2	88
C3	75
C4	62
C5	55
C6	40

F

	Jan	June	Dec
C1	95	95	95
C2	88	88	88
C3	75	80	87
C4	62	66	70
C5	55	58	60
C6	40	50	60

G

Is My Child Top of the Class?

Many parents are obsessed with finding out if their child is cleverer than everyone else's. When I was a teacher, I rarely had a conversation with a parent without them asking, directly or indirectly, whether their child was top, middle or bottom of the pack.

I understand the motivation to find out and I am certainly not immune to the same desire to know. However, this really shouldn't matter for a number of reasons:

- a)** Learning is about making progress, not about being better or worse than someone else.
- b)** Comparisons more often than not lead to despondency, worry or complacency.
- c)** Children will be in a certain group only for a short time. Once they move, the comparisons will be obsolete. What will remain is their attitude to learning itself.

The illustrations opposite make this point. They show the scores achieved by six children: Child 1 (C1) to Child 6 (C6).

In the first diagram, someone with a Fixed (F) mindset is comparing data vertically. They're hoping their child is C1 or C2, or at the very least C3 or C4. They'll certainly be worried if their child is C5 or C6. And yet this set of figures tells us *nothing* about learning.

By comparison, the second diagram shows the first set of scores together with the subsequent scores achieved by each student. Now at last there is some information about learning. We can see quite clearly which children are making progress (C3, C4 and C6 in particular) and which are not (C1 and C2).

So, if I'm a parent with a fixed mindset (F), then I might be quite happy, maybe even boastful, that my child is C1 or C2. However, if I'm a parent of C1 or C2 and I have a growth mindset (G), then I would be concerned as to why my child is not making any progress at all. Are they not being challenged? Is the work too easy? Are they being allowed to coast? Or has the scoring system reached its limit? Whichever of these it might be, I'd want to help bring about some changes.

You get what you measure

I had the great pleasure of listening to Nick Zeniuk presenting at a conference in Malaysia some years ago. Together with Peter Senge and the late W. Edwards Deming, Zeniuk was responsible for building the 1995–1998 Lincoln Continental, a car that set company performance records in terms of quality, timing and cost savings. A key to their success was realising that 'you get what you measure.' Instead of checking time worked, they began to measure the level of collaboration between colleagues, and almost immediately changed the culture of the company for the better.

I believe it is the same with children.

If we focus on correct answers, then that is what children will infer is important. This can lead to them doing whatever is needed to get full marks – including choosing the easy option, because that increases the chance of getting everything right, or even cheating.

Whereas, if we clearly show that we are impressed with effort, determination, desire and concentration, this then can lead to children being more willing to undertake harder challenges and to set themselves more complex tasks – in other words, to engage in learning behaviour.

So the next time a child gets 10 out of 10 in a test, I'd recommend going for one of the following responses:

'Wow, that's a good score – did you find you had to work hard to get everything right?'

'Congratulations – that must have required a lot of concentration to get full marks.'

'Well done – you got 10 out of 10 for right answers. So what score would you give yourself for effort required?'

'That's a better score than you got on the last test you took. What do you think made the difference?'

Note to teachers – Praise and feedback should be kept separate

There are some interesting notes on page 121 of John Hattie's *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2012), in which he states:

'Praise includes little information about performance on the task and praise provides little help in answering the three feedback questions (where am I going; how am I doing; where should I go next?) ... Hyland and Hyland (2006) noted that almost half of teachers' feedback was praise, and that premature and gratuitous praise confused students and discouraged revisions ... The message is ... praise the students and make them feel welcomed to your class and worthwhile as learners, but if you wish to make a major difference to learning, leave praise out of feedback about learning.'

A Cautionary Note About Effort

It is easy to get carried away with the idea that effort is all that matters. That is simply not true.

Even if I put huge effort into practising something – but that something is irrelevant to the desired outcome (eg, spending hours rehearsing the wrong lines for a play) – then success is unlikely.

Success comes from trying hard at the right thing, at the right time, with the right support from the right people, *and* using talents wisely (and perhaps hoping for a bit of luck along the way).

At the end of this chapter, I share a story about my daughter and the varying levels of effort she puts in to swimming and dancing. Happily she is making wonderful progress in her swimming. This is *partly* as a result of her efforts but it is also because of expert teaching that focuses on technique, challenge and enjoyment.

Genetics also play a role, dare I say it. She swims with a friend of hers who is built like a whippet – there is not an ounce of fat on him. When he swims, a part of his effort has to go into not sinking, whereas Ava doesn't have that problem – she floats pretty well!

The key to developing a growth mindset is to focus on progress. Talk about progress, praise progress, celebrate it and, above all, recognise it as synonymous with learning. Progress is learning and learning is progress.