



Brainworks®

Teaching Skills that Result in Life-Changing Behaviors

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The Type of Praise That Motivates

by Lori Bivens

Jane, a former client of Brainworks Learning Center, was a 19-year-old college dropout. She had been praised for her intelligence since starting pre-school, had made nearly straight A's through high school, and had even made a perfect score on the math section of the SAT. She decided to come to Brainworks when she realized she was in danger of failing a course at community college. Why couldn't she excel in college? Jane had given up and refused to believe that she had anything left inside her to contribute to the world.

Susan's case was similar. Her parents told her she was smart all of the time, and she believed it herself, but she never had very good grades and sometimes had to worry about passing classes. However, the 17-year-old excelled in music, something she put all of her time and energy into. Although she didn't believe she had the ability to pull off straight A's or ace her entrance exams, Susan knew she could have a brilliant career as a musician if she put her mind to it.

One of the things these young women had in common was the twice-exceptional label. Both were gifted in multiple areas, but both

had Inattentive ADHD and other, less extreme learning disabilities. In fact, most of the clients who end up at the Brainworks center in Carrollton, Texas have earned the same label. Many of them have been called lazy, unintelligent, or apathetic because they are unable to use their talents, and their parents and teachers are concerned primarily with results.

“Fixed Mindset”

Carol S. Dweck, Stanford Psychology professor and author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, has researched gifted students with different views on their intellectual ability and potential. In her article, “Giftedness: A Motivational Perspective,” she calls these views “mindsets” and has differentiated two different mindsets of gifted individuals. A child with a “fixed mindset” believes that his intelligence is limited and can eventually run out. His major goal is “to look and feel smart,” and effort in intellectual endeavors implies less intelligence and low ability. He believes that any setback reveals his “(permanent) deficiencies,” and, over time, this mindset will hinder his learning and achievement.

“Growth Mindset”

On the other hand, a child with a “growth mindset” believes that his intelligence can increase over time with study. His major goal is learning new things, and he sees effort as a positive tool to gain knowledge. He knows that setbacks simply mean that he must work a little harder, and, eventually, his mindset will foster learning and success.

Praising Effort, Not Intelligence

Dweck's studies show that these mindsets are, in part, a direct result of the praise given to children as they develop. She says that most parents, in an effort to build their child's self-esteem, praise the child's intelligence or talent. How-



“I'm lacing a gingerbread man.”

Jhon Hernandez watches Nicholas Fukunaga in a hand-eye coordination activity.

ever, her studies show that this praise creates a fixed mindset and can cause children to lose their “confidence, interest, and ability to perform well” after a setback. The children in the study who were praised for their efforts chose to pursue more challenging tasks that they could learn from, “remained confident and engaged” in their activities even after a setback, and were more likely to report their scores truthfully than the other group.

Teachers at Brainworks make an effort to determine what kind of mindset clients have upon arrival. All students are assessed for their individual strengths and weaknesses, and the teachers build a plan to use the strengths to overcome the weaknesses. Jane, for example, had a very clear-cut fixed mindset. She believed that her intelligence had already been tapped out. She was going to go back to college but had no hopes for success. Susan, on the other hand, came in with a fixed mindset regarding academics and a growth mindset toward her music. She did not believe she could get any smarter, but she knew that she could improve at playing the piano if she tried hard and practiced.

Along the way, clients are praised for their efforts and questioned about the different strategies they use, whether their answers are correct or incorrect. Jane had trouble with



“Really?”

Nic Snawder listens to Scott Slesinger telling the history of the game SET.

Ineffective Praise Can Lower Motivation and Self-Esteem

this approach. Believing that nothing she could do would help her regain her “lost” intelligence, she refused to accept any kind of praise, no matter how insignificant. Susan found the praise a bit amusing. She was more open to it because of her belief that she could get better in some areas, but it seemed funny to her that someone would praise her smallest efforts at improving her brain.

Risks of Ineffective Praise

Randy Hitz (Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University) and Amy Driscoll (Associate Senior Scholar with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching), in their article “Praise in the Classroom,” cite other studies that agree with Dweck’s work. For example, “Meyer (1979) found that under some conditions, praise led recipients to have low expectations of success at difficult tasks, which in turn decreased the persistence and performance intensity at the task.” This held true for all students, no matter how gifted. Not only can the wrong kind of praise lower motivation, as both studies prove, it can also affect self-esteem. Hitz and Driscoll point out that “no student can always be ‘good’ or ‘nice’ or ‘smart.’”

An even more dangerous side effect of ineffective praise is loss of self-motivation. Even children who possess internal motivation for learning can be derailed, say Hitz and Driscoll, referring to a study of preschool children by Green and Lepper (1974). When their teachers began praising them for doing what they were already motivated to do, they actually became less motivated.

Dweck’s conclusion is that children should be praised for their “effort, strategy, concentration, perseverance, and improvement,” not for their intelligence. “Telling children how smart they are backfires,” she says. Brainworks agrees with this assessment. Student instructors are taught to praise the

positive efforts a client makes, even when he struggles with an activity, and one of the things the clients like best is the post-testing that is done every 40 hours, so they and their parents can see how much improvement they have made over time. Susan, for example, was amazed to see her test results after attending Brainworks for two weeks of summer camp. She had improved by 62% in math, 3% in reading (she was already very talented), and 16% on the Structure of the Intellect (SOI), a processing skills test all clients must take before enrolling in Brainworks. Jane improved 3% in math and 1% in reading since her scores were already very high but managed to improve 21% on her SOI scores. These improvements helped them realize that they could literally retrain their brains to become more efficient and effective and, therefore, smarter.

Praise Versus Encouragement

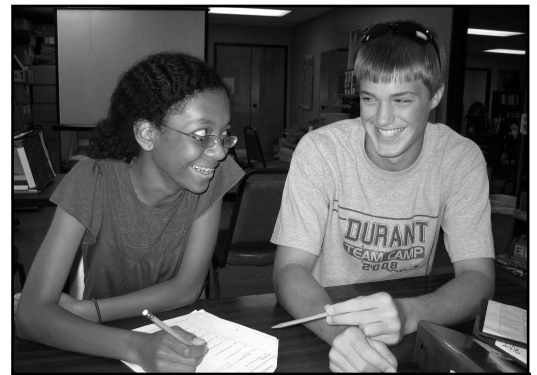
According to Hitz and Driscoll, effective praise does exist; they refer to it as “encouragement.” The difference between the ineffective praise referred to above and encouragement is that encouragement “does not place judgment on student work or give information regarding its value or implications of student status.” Another difference is that while praise is generally given at the end of a completed task, encouragement may occur at any stage of the task, from beginning to end.

Carol S. Dweck, in another article, “The Perils and Promises of Praise,” gives specific examples of encouragement for teachers and parents.

1. For the student who tries hard and does well: “I like the way you tried all kinds of strategies on that math problem until you finally got it.”
2. For the student who does not try and still does well: “All right, that was too easy for you. Let’s do something more challenging that you can learn from.”
3. For the student who tries hard and still does poorly: “I liked the effort you put in. Let’s work together some more and figure out what you don’t understand.”

One Last Pitfall

Jane and Susan had something else in common besides their Inattentive ADHD; they were also both victims of “Perfect Sibling Syndrome.” Jane had a younger brother who was as brilliant as she but also had the ability to do everything right. He got up on time in the morning, he limited his showers to 10 minutes, and he kept track of every single homework assignment and extracurricular event in a neat, tidy little planner. He did everything Jane’s parents wished she



“I Know I’m Right!”

Ivie Gordon defends her answer in response to Hunter Crutsinger’s questioning.

would do, and he got high praise for his efforts as well as his genius.

Susan had an older sister who was absolutely perfect as well. She had completed college with better than average grades and was married to a successful man. They had even contributed a grandchild to the family.

Brainworks teachers see these family dynamics over and over. One child is praised for the myriad things he or she does well, and the other, less functional child is labeled merely as “smart, but hopeless.” This takes ineffective praise to an extreme, mixing it with sibling rivalry and feelings of inferiority on the part of the “lesser” child. For these clients, encouragement of efforts and strategies must be the highest priority at Brainworks. Every effort is made to improve self-esteem and confidence.

As always, teachers and parents must be careful of what is said to young learners. Even praise has its problems and must be thoughtfully considered before being distributed haphazardly to an impressionable student. Brainworks teachers spend considerable time training both teachers and student instructors in how to motivate and encourage clients. Jane was able to pass her community college courses with grades high enough to transfer to her new school, and Susan is still attending Brainworks to work on her math skills and reading speed. Her current goal is to graduate early from high school. She has seen her natural talents for math and reading and now realizes that she can do more than just play piano.

Failure Is Not An Option

At Brainworks, failure is not an option; everyone works together to support each client and ensure his future success. It takes the conscious efforts of the teachers (both at Brainworks and at school), student instructors, parents, and the client himself to maintain consistency in attitude and work habits to achieve the client’s goals.



“I love to read!”

Laurel Pinkney (left) receives a brag slip from Student Instructor, Jeniffer Rocha, for reading 480 words per minute with 90% comprehension.

“Do We Have a Failure to Communicate?”

by Carla Crutsinger

At no time in history have there been so many ways for us to communicate. We are tied to our latest electronic gadgets. We have cell phones, e-mail, faxes, the internet, and voice mail. However, one of the drawbacks of living in the electronic age is the decline of conversational skills. That is why Brainworks, a diagnostic and tutorial center, has started to include communication activities in their regular academic summer camp.

As well as the 16 different thinking skills such as memory, reading, math, and time management, each student is taught how to ask questions to get a conversation started and how to become a better listener. Since Socrates, educators have employed guided questions for the purpose of instruction.

Pathway to Explore

“In this program,” according to Lori Bivens, Brainworks Language Arts Curriculum Coordinator, “questions have carefully been worded and placed in a certain sequence to form a ‘pathway’ for learners to explore identities, opinions, and value systems. The goal for these exercises is for each student to be able to answer the questions ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where do I stand on a variety of issues?’”

Each day before lunch, the clients at the Brainworks Leadership Summer Camp are prepped with a new communication skill to practice during the trip to a local restaurant. Clients are paired with college and high school student instructors for these outings.

First Impressions

Scott Slesinger, a student instructor from University of Southern California, says, “We

start out talking about what to do to make a good first impression. We also brainstorm the actions of a good friend, such as wanting a friend to look at you when you are talking, and it helps if the listener acts like she is interested in what you are saying. Otherwise, you may want to stop talking to that person. In addition to these observations, we talk about peers we tend to avoid, such as those who frown often and those who seem to delight in insulting others.”

Face-to-Face Exchanges

The next lessons “put awareness into action” as the students begin to build skills for face-to-face exchanges with peers. To have successful interactions, the clients need to acquire so-called “people skills.” Through direct communication, they learn the rhythm of conversation, the ebb and flow of listening, talking, and pausing. They learn how to interpret nonverbal signals such as hand gestures and facial expressions, and they discover at the same time how to respond to their conversation partner by adjusting language and tone of voice accordingly.

As clients master these skills, they gain confidence in their ability to advocate for themselves and achieve their goals in life. Individuals who have strong people skills tend to get the outcomes they desire; these students become “winners” in society.

Questions to Provoke Thinking

According to Becky French, the acting director of Brainworks, “The reason we stress these conversation activities is that all too often students never reach this plateau of victory. Their initial experiences with communication have been awkward or painful. As a result, they shy away from the very experiences that are needed to improve their conversation skills. They find themselves in a withdrawn state, avoiding opportunities for fear of being rejected. The defining nature of this program is to create a non-threatening context, so individuals can learn without feeling defensive. All answers are accepted; there are no right and wrong answers. The questions are designed to provoke thinking and self-analysis.”

“As conversationalists,” says Yesly Ruiz, a student at Texas Women’s University, “we are very conscious of the spoken and written word, but some researchers believe that up to 90% of the message is transmitted without words.”



Can you guess my tone of voice?

Kayla Jones is demonstrating an “enthusiastic” tone of voice to Xander Rudelis during a leadership lesson.

Nonverbal Communication

This nonverbal communication gives the speaker several effective tools to clarify and enhance the message being conveyed. He relies on body language, facial expressions, eye contact, personal appearance and touch to make points with the audience.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication has two components: the speaker and the listener. Each of these has certain responsibilities to make sure there is not a breakdown in communication. As the sender of the message, the speaker has a number of tools available to enhance the message. They include the speed of speech, the volume, the use of inflections and pauses, and tone of voice. In addition, speakers must monitor the reception of the audience, should seek feedback in the form of questions and should be receptive to the nonverbal messages offered by the listeners.

On the other hand, the audience needs to be aware that they are giving the speaker messages through “body language signals,” and they should make an effort to maintain eye contact with the speaker. To help the listener maintain focus, he could take notes, jot down key words, summarize what is being said, and/or ask questions.

As clients and their student instructors walk to lunch each day, they enter into an active laboratory to practice reacting to “personal space issues,” reading subtle eye messages, asking questions to clarify mixed signals, and treating each other with dignity and respect.

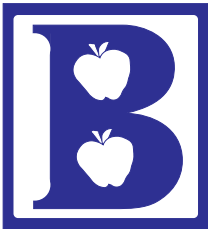
Self-Confidence, A Byproduct

Self-confidence is the byproduct of their lunchtime experience. They have tested their new communication tools and discovered new strategies for making and keeping friends for the next school year. What more could you ask?



“Way to Go!”

Student Instructor, Tony Ronquillo, enjoys lunch with Mark Gallemore during the Leadership Summer Camp.



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