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How and when should praise be given?

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In my previous article about parenting in sport (link available below), it was concluded parents should support, praise and encourage their child's involvement in sport. What failed to be detailed however, is when praise should be given and where it should be directed. Therefore I shall attempt to answer these questions in the current article.

It was once widely believed praise, regardless of its form, is beneficial to a child's motivation, enjoyment and involvement in sport and academics. However when insincere, praise can undermine a child's motivation (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). Furthermore, inappropriate praise, e.g. praise for completing an easy task, can lead children to underestimate their level of ability (Graham, 1990). This may have detrimental effects on motivation and enjoyment since the children may feel less competent as a result of being praised for something they have not found challenging.

In addition to praise needing to be sincere and appropriate, Mueller and Dweck (1998) showed that the type of praise given to children can influence them in different ways. They differentiated between two forms of praise; "process-praise" and "person-praise". Process-praise refers to praising an individual's method or technique, for example "Brilliant shot placement! Great dribbling technique!" Person-praise on the other hand refers more to the praising of an individual's ability, giving the impression they are naturally gifted, e.g. "You're such a good passer of the ball! You're a born striker".

The authors gave one group of students person-praise and another group process-praise, assessing their subsequent theory of ability adopted. Theory of ability refers to how individuals develop beliefs about themselves and the nature of their competence (Dweck, 1999). Two

ABOUT JENNIFER HOBSON



I graduated from Newcastle University in 2013 with a degree in psychology, and am currently studying MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology at Loughborough University. My desire is to become a successful Sport Psychologist, applying what I have learnt at both Newcastle and Loughborough universities to a variety of sport settings and members of staff. Whilst at Newcastle I was heavily involved in the Ladies hockey club, working my way up the club, standing as captain and beginning my training to become a qualified hockey coach. This progression has shown me the perspectives of a variety of "roles" in a team; a new player trying to impress, a team member turning up every week, or a leader, managing each of these types of people and others. As such I have a passion for understanding and getting the best out of team players, leading my pursuit of a Sport Psychologist's career. @JenHobSporty

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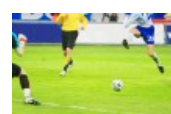
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contrasting theories of ability exist; firstly incremental theory states that intelligence/performance is not a fixed trait; it can be improved with hard work. The second theory, entity theory, states that intelligence and level of performance is fixed, and an individual is successful because of some innate power, rather than because of the effort and hard work they have put in. Research has shown subsequent performance improvements for individuals adopting an incremental theory of ability, which were not observed in individuals with an entity theory (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007; Akbar & Ali, 2012; Woolger & Power, 2000). Therefore an incremental theory of ability is desirable.

In the study, children who received process-praise developed an incremental theory of ability; believed their level of performance was due to their hard work and effort. Conversely, individuals who received person-praise adopted an entity theory of ability; they described intelligence as being a fixed trait (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

The type of praise given has also been shown to influence motivation, which is important in child-athletes if they are to enjoy and remain involved in sport. Again process-praised was considered more beneficial than person-praise, since individuals who received process-praise were more intrinsically motivated, and perceived higher levels of competence than those who received person-praise (Haimovitz & Henderlong Corpus, 2011)

The usefulness of praise can be summed up from the following findings; a control group (receiving no praise) was compared to groups receiving person or process-praise. It was evident that praise (regardless of which type) was more beneficial than receiving no praise at all. However process-praise was more beneficial to motivation than person-praise (Henderlong, 2000).

In summary, the research into the influence of the wording of praise highlights the importance of praising the “process”, i.e. the individual’s technique, and not the “person” or outcome. Furthermore, praise should be given only when it is truly meant by the person giving the praise, and truly deserved by the person receiving it. So, when you are next out coaching athletes, or teaching students, or at your child’s game, praise their process and not the person.

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