

From the principal's desk...

As I walk into classrooms and in the hallways, I see our kids working hard and teachers acknowledging the positive behaviors that reflect our high expectations for all students at Douglass Elementary. One of the tenets of our Positive Behavior Support program is to notice students who demonstrate safety, responsibility, and respect.

Sometimes, though, I catch myself at home with my own two children violating that tenet. It's not the positive part, not the acknowledging part – it's the specific type of praise that I offer my kids.

The *New York Magazine* published an article two years ago called "The Power (and Peril) of Praising Your Kids – How Not to Talk to Your Kids." I've posted that article in the Principal's Page of the Douglass web site. The problem this article specifically addresses is the underachievement of high-ability students – and teachers' and parents' unwitting role in exacerbating the problem.

The article describes a study of fifth grade classrooms in New York City, which divided students into two groups. One group of students was given praise for their intelligence after completing a test – "You must really be smart!" The other group was praised for their effort – "You must have worked very hard!"

Later, the two groups of students were then given a choice of taking an easy set of puzzles, or a more rigorous group. 90% of the students praised for effort chose the harder puzzles – while a majority of students praised for intelligence took the easier way out.

In other tests, "smart" students found themselves frustrated when things got hard – they started to doubt if they were smart after all, or perhaps not "smart enough" for that task. The "effort" students didn't give up and out-performed their "smart" classmates.

Look at the power we have as adults in our kids' lives – we want to praise our kids, but we also should be intentional about the words we use, conscious of the message kids receive. It appears that kids praised for their intelligence get the message "I'm smart – I don't need to put out so much effort." And the more specific and sincere the praise, the better our kids respond. The article included a story about a hockey team that improved its results after coaches were intentional about the praise the athletes received, such as the number of checks they delivered to opponents.

Hopefully, I'll be able to bring consistency to my parenting as I try at school – being specific in my praise, as well as avoiding praising kids for being smart. Should we praise kids? Absolutely. But we should also ensure that the honest feedback our kids get doesn't backfire.