The Inverse Power of Praise

Growth and Fixed Mindsets were the topics of two of my letters last year. This continues to be an important concept for all who are raising children. It is crucial to those raising gifted youngsters, who are prone to praising them by telling them how smart they are.

Many of our gifted children note that from birth, they have been observed with wonder and continually hear exclamations regarding all that they are able to do. They believe they are smart because you, relatives and even strangers tell them so. This praise seems normal and natural, doesn’t it? However it results in a Fixed Mindset. The Fixed Mindset is thinking you are smart combined with thinking you don’t have to work to learn. The Fixed Mindset results in a person who thinks that if they are seen working, it is proof that they aren’t smart. It also results in a student not completing work or not handing it in because a zero is better than the possibility of a disappointing grade.

A strong work ethic, perseverance and the desire to learn more are the components of the Growth Mindset. I recently had the following conversation with a youngster who said he had overheard his classmates say he was smart. I asked him what it meant to be smart and he said,

“For me it is knowing a lot of stuff and being able to solve your problems when you need to.”

I said, “What if I told you there was something better than ‘being smart’?”

“What would that be?” he asked.


“I do!” he exclaimed loudly. “You have to work hard to get smart.”

When I asked him, “You’re already smart, why do you continue to work hard?”

He replied, “To keep learning because later in life, the more knowledge you have, the better position you are in when you are trying to find a job. People want smart people to work for them. Besides there is still a lot of stuff I don’t know!”

I said, “You believe that you can learn anything, don’t you?”

His answer was, “If you put your mind to it...and if you work hard at it!”

Please read the attached document, How Not to Talk to Your Kids: The inverse power of praise by Po Bronson. I am interested in your thoughts on this article and these ideas.

Academically Gifted Parent Letter, February 2012