What to say when your six-year-old shows you what she built

"My six-year-old shows me her Lego tower and asks "Am I good at building?" I say "You're so smart!" What should I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're so smart! You're the best builder ever."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You put the wide blocks at the bottom so it wouldn't wobble. How did you think of that?"

"You're so smart" feels like the kindest thing to say. The trouble is what it promises: that being smart is something she either has or hasn't, and the next wobbly tower might take it away.

What the research found at this age

In one study, 64 children aged five and six acted out tasks with toy figures and were praised either as a person (along the lines of being a good girl or boy) or for the way they did the task. Then came a task with a setback. Children praised as a person showed more "helpless" responses afterwards, including blaming themselves, rating their work lower and giving up sooner, than children praised for the process. The researchers concluded that even positive praise about the person can make a child's sense of worth hang on the next result. It was a role-play study, not a test of family life.

A later set of studies looked at inflated praise ("That's incredibly beautiful!"). Adults gave more of it to children with low self-esteem, and in an experiment those children then chose easier tasks. Over-the-top praise is not the same as warmth.

What the words do

Take 2 names the plan (wide blocks at the bottom) and asks how she thought of it, so the credit goes to her thinking, not to a label. If the tower falls tomorrow, that thinking is still hers. The American Academy of Pediatrics puts it simply: praise success and good tries, and be specific.

For when a child turns this on herself, see the guide on what to say when your child says "I'm stupid".

If you live in two homes

Each home will praise in its own way, and a child can live with two styles. You don't need the other parent to change their words. If your child brings something made at the other home, describe it the way you would one made in yours. That tells them their work is welcome here, wherever it was made.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.