What to say when your ten-year-old gets a good test result

"My ten-year-old got 19 out of 20 on a maths test and I said "You're a genius!" Now he dreads every test. What should I praise instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're a genius! I always knew you were smart."

"You're a genius" is meant as a gift. It also quietly sets a standard: geniuses don't get things wrong, so the next hard paper is a risk to the label.

What the research found at this age

In six studies, fifth graders (about ten and eleven years old) solved a set of problems and were praised either for their intelligence or for their effort. Then they were given a much harder set they could not do well. After that failure, the children praised for intelligence persisted less, enjoyed the problems less and did worse on a later set than the children praised for effort. They were also more likely to describe intelligence as fixed. These were short experiments with puzzles and one sentence of praise, not a study of years of parenting.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You practised those fractions every night, and it showed. Which one took the most thinking?"

It is worth keeping the bigger picture modest. Two meta-analyses pooling many studies found that the overall link between "growth mindset" and school achievement was weak, and so was the overall effect of mindset programmes. Praising the process is a sensible habit, not a lever on grades.

What the words do

Take 2 names what he did (practised every night) and connects it to the result, so the result is something he caused and can cause again. The question that follows asks about the hardest part, which treats difficulty as the interesting bit. The American Academy of Pediatrics says the same in plainer words: praise success and good tries, and be specific.

If you live in two homes

Children in two homes often show a result to one parent first. If you hear about it second, you can still praise the work: "I heard about the maths test. What did you do differently this time?" Leave out any comparison with how the other home reacted.

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.