

# Praise: What actually works

It's September—back-to-school time. For me, the annual “fall feeling” has never really abated, even though I have not attended school for, ahem, quite a few years now. When days get shorter and leaves start to turn, a familiar anxiety returns. It's more than just mourning another summer gone by, more than missing the carefree days by the lake and late-night s'mores. For me, the fall feeling is chest-tightening anticipation, which is undoubtedly conditioned from many years of academic pressure, long hours, and innumerable high-stakes exams. Perhaps you can relate?

These days I try to channel my anxiety into something positive, using it as a way to empathize and connect with medical students and my children. To motivate learners without adding undue pressure, I have become mindful about the power and pitfalls of praise.

My interest in praise and human motivation was sparked in a McGill University psychology class. The professor, Richard Koestner, pointed out that we tend to feel bad about giving out rewards, but we readily dole out praise. Praise, referring to the verbal-support kind, not the religious kind, is more complex than one might think, however, as it depends heavily on context. The effect of praise can be motivating, but it can also be detrimental, depending on the relationship, public nature, and specific type of praise one is given.

According to Koestner,<sup>1</sup> of the nine types of praise, only one works for motivation. Therefore, knowing how *not* to praise may be just as important as learning the best way. The forms of praise that are not motivating are: (1) praise as positive guidance, (2) praise as a transition ritual, (3) praise as balance for criticism, (4) praise as a peacemaker, (5) praise as a consolation prize, (6) praise after student-elicited stroking, (7) praise as attempted vicarious reinforcement, and (8) praise as a vindication of predictions.

Praise is motivational only when it comes as a spontaneous expression of admiration. To act as reinforcement, praise should be *contingent, specific, and credible*.<sup>1,2</sup> It is also important to note that praise is not the same as feedback.

When referring to praise as encouragement, Professor Koestner often cited a well-known psychologist, Carol Dweck, who has written about the importance of cultivating a growth mindset. In a growth mindset, children and learners are praised for the process, rather than the person. For example, we can recognize a child for their efforts and approach to school, which is entirely within their control, rather than for being good at school, which builds unrealistic expectations to always perform well.

When we foster a child's intrinsic motivation, we also help them build resilience. By acknowledging their setbacks and failures, we can also strengthen their ability to persevere and develop new tools. Here are some phrases I find help illustrate this

approach:<sup>3</sup> “You are good at trying different ways to solve a hard puzzle.” “You solved the problem with great focus.” “You make a difference in this.” “The reason for going to school is to learn, not just to do well on tests.”

Whether in medical school or grade school, feeling pressure to achieve is inevitable. But as physicians, parents, and educators, we can keep in mind that the best motivators are the goals students set for themselves. Although we can't write their tests or do surgeries on their behalf, we can empower our students to believe in their potential. ■

—Caitlin Dunne, MD

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## References

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# Every child matters

The 30th of September is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a recognized federal statutory holiday, which has been observed since 2021 after legislative changes were made by the Government of Canada. In 2021, Orange Shirt Day became the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to honor children who survived residential schools and those who didn't. According to the Government of Canada, the purpose is to honor "the children who never returned home and Survivors of residential schools, as well as their families and communities. Public commemoration of the tragic and painful history and ongoing impacts of residential schools is a vital component of the reconciliation process."<sup>1</sup> The day is named after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which traveled across Canada between 2007 and 2015 to document the lived experiences of people who attended residential and day schools between 1876 and 1996. The TRC listened to over 6500 survivors and produced a report in 2015 with 94 calls to action to help move from truth-telling to reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Call to Action #80 calls for the establishment of a statutory holiday to recognize the history of residential schools and to honor both survivors and those who never came home.

It took finding 215 unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School for the necessary legislative changes to be made to implement this statutory holiday. The news of these little ones who never made it home deeply impacted both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. The grief was palpable. It was tangible proof of what the witnesses reported in the TRC's Final Report, which stated that at least 4000 to 6000 children who attended residential schools died.<sup>2</sup> First Nations people and their communities always knew the graves existed

and needed to fight for the resources to recover their loved ones. Since these first children were found, more than 1700 graves have been found at or near seven residential schools across Canada.

These findings gave new meaning to Orange Shirt Day, which has been recognized on 30 September since 2013 to bring awareness to the harmful impacts

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of residential schools, just one of many assimilation policies aimed at eliminating Indigenous peoples' culture and languages.<sup>3</sup> Children were often emotionally, physically, and sexually abused in addition to being forcibly removed from their parents and communities. This trauma has been passed down across multiple generations, resulting in the health disparities we see today.<sup>2</sup> The color orange was chosen to recognize Phyllis Webstad's experience of having her orange shirt forcibly removed and her hair cut on her first day attending the residential school near Williams Lake. She felt like she didn't matter, which is why Orange Shirt Day's slogan is "Every child matters."<sup>3</sup> As Indigenous children represent over 50% of children currently in the care of the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, our country needs this reminder more than ever.

My great-uncle Patrick Prince never made it home from residential school. He was my late maternal grandmother's younger brother. His parents were never notified of his passing, no details were provided,

and no grave was found. My grandmother was deeply traumatized by her time at the Lejac Residential School, and although she attended the TRC events, she never gave her testimony. The few times she made any reference to Lejac, she was filled with sorrow and rage, particularly when talking about her younger brother Patrick. We will never know her story, and her unresolved trauma has become my own.

I wear orange for my grandmother. I wear orange for my great-uncle Patrick. I wear orange for my daughter. I wear orange for justice. And I hope you, too, will wear orange on 30 September to remember all that was lost due to residential schools and to stand in solidarity with Indigenous people in Canada. I also hope it will translate to a lot more reconcili-ACTION at all levels. ■

—Terri Aldred, MD

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