



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp



The specificity of parenting effects: Differential relations of parent praise and criticism to children's theories of intelligence and learning goals

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 September 2017

Revised 8 February 2018

Keywords:

Theories of intelligence

Learning goals

Parent praise

Parent criticism

Feedback

Parenting

ABSTRACT

Individuals who believe that intelligence can be improved with effort (an *incremental theory of intelligence*) and who approach challenges with the goal of improving their understanding (a *learning goal*) tend to have higher academic achievement. Furthermore, parent praise is associated with children's incremental theories and learning goals. However, the influences of parental criticism, as well as different forms of praise and criticism (e.g., process vs. person), have received less attention. We examine these associations by analyzing two existing datasets (Study 1: $N = 317$ first to eighth graders; Study 2: $N = 282$ fifth and eighth graders). In both studies, older children held more incremental theories of intelligence, but lower learning goals, than younger children. Unexpectedly, the relation between theories of intelligence and learning goals was nonsignificant and did not vary with children's grade level. In both studies, overall perceived parent praise positively related to children's learning goals, whereas perceived parent criticism negatively related to incremental theories of intelligence. In Study 2, perceived parent *process praise* was the only significant (positive) predictor of children's learning goals, whereas perceived parent *person criticism* was the only significant (negative) predictor of incremental theories of intelligence. Finally, Study 2 provided some

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support for our hypothesis that age-related differences in perceived parent praise and criticism can explain age-related differences in children's learning goals. Results suggest that incremental theories of intelligence and learning goals might not be strongly related during childhood and that perceived parent praise and criticism have important, but distinct, relations with each motivational construct.

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Introduction

Beliefs about intelligence and goal orientations related to academic performance are thought to form coherent “motivational frameworks” that influence academic success (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Gunderson et al., 2013; Gunderson, Sorhagen, et al., 2018). Implicit *theories of intelligence* (Dweck, 2006) fall onto a spectrum ranging from a strong belief that intelligence is fixed and unchangeable (an *entity theory*) to a strong belief that intelligence is malleable and can be improved with effort (an *incremental theory*). Incremental theories of intelligence lead to more adaptive approaches to academics, including persistence in the face of challenges, enjoyment of difficult tasks, and higher grades in school (e.g., Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Yeager et al., 2016). Entity theories, on the other hand, are associated with maladaptive responses, including avoiding challenging tasks and lying to inflate one's score on a test (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Similarly, goal orientation theory has identified two major motivational goals that students adopt: *learning goals*, which focus on improving mastery and competence (often for intrinsic enjoyment), and *performance goals*, which focus on proving competence to others and avoiding the appearance of having low ability (e.g., E. Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Nicholls, 1984). Learning goals lead to higher intrinsic motivation, persistence after failure, and higher academic achievement (e.g., Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Grant & Dweck, 2003). In contrast, performance goals lead to lower intrinsic motivation, lower self-worth and less effort after failure, and ultimately lower academic achievement.

Traditionally, researchers have argued that incremental theories of intelligence lead to learning goals (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), but some studies have raised questions about whether this is true for young children (Pomerantz & Saxon, 2001). In the current studies, we investigated age differences in theories of intelligence and learning goals as well as perceived parent praise and criticism among first to eighth graders with three overarching goals: (a) to understand age-related differences in incremental theories of intelligence and learning goals and their relation to each other, (b) to investigate how each construct is related to parents' praise and criticism, and (c) to determine whether age-related differences in parent praise and criticism can help to explain age-related differences in theories of intelligence and learning goals. Understanding how praise and criticism are associated with young children's academic motivation has substantial practical implications for parents and other caregivers who seek to provide academic feedback that will enhance children's motivation and achievement.

Our approach draws on multiple theoretical perspectives on motivation, including Dweck and colleagues' social-cognitive theory of motivation integrated with attribution theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999) and cognitive evaluation theory (a subtheory of self-determination theory; Deci & Ryan, 1980). We also draw on expectancy-value theory, especially when considering parents as socializers (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). All three theoretical perspectives have substantial empirical support. Thus, we made our specific predictions in cases when these theories and prior research align, as described below. In cases where these theories are in tension with one another, or do not make clear predictions, we present exploratory hypotheses that rely on additional assumptions.

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