

## ‘Lazy’, ‘messy’, ‘smart’: how labels affect a child’s personality development



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Words have a direct impact on the formation of a child’s identity. By labelling children, for example categorising them as “lazy” or “clever”, we may actually be doing them a disservice. We might see ourselves as benevolent architects of their future, but we might, involuntarily, be holding them back.

There is a delicate balance between uplifting or helping a child to grow and condemning them. It is vital that we reflect on whether our words build bridges or barriers for the children who hear them.

### **Labels: beyond praise and criticism**

In psychology, the term labelling refers to the process through which people classify or describe the identity of people who deviate significantly from what is considered normal or appropriate.

Some experts have defined them as the attribution of qualities to a given subject, which are used to describe or identify them. In this sense, when we use labels we are implicitly judging how far a person strays from, or adheres to, social expectations.

### **The impact of labelling on childhood development**

Most experts consider there to be two types of label: positive and negative. Regarding the latter, some studies claim that persistent negative evaluations of a child’s performance by the authority figures around them can influence a child’s perception of themselves. If we make a habit of telling a child “you’re so slow!” or “you always get it wrong!”, it will be very difficult to change this self perception at later stages of development.

These expectations can have an impact on behaviour and personality, negatively affecting a child’s self esteem and self perception, which can lead to a feeling of inferiority.

Positive labels can be just as bad. Psychologist Jonathan Secanella states that when children are labelled by their achievements – saying, for example, “you did well in that test because you’re smart” – we connect a child’s intrinsic worth with their performance. This can lead them to believe that a drop in performance means a corresponding drop in their value as a person.

It is therefore a mistake to think that frequently giving children or students positive labels helps to boost their self-esteem. Studies have shown how parents' beliefs, which influence the labels they give their children, impact the development of emotional recognition skills in childhood.

A child accustomed to thinking they get good marks at school because they are clever, for example, may end up with a fear of failure, and be more prone to frustration and overexerting themselves.

So how do we convey the message that something has been done well, or that we think an action or behaviour is commendable? The key lies in linking labels to the process rather than the outcome, especially in academic settings. We can, for example, show our satisfaction with the degree of involvement or effort in a child's piece of work, rather than the grade achieved.

### **Educating or stigmatising?**

Although various studies show that separating students by ability could give them a more personalised and therefore more effective education, some experts believe this leads to stigmatisation, peer rejection and ridicule, and in turn to isolation and withdrawal.

Labels have the power to define what an individual will become. They directly impact our beliefs about our abilities, meaning an individual, once labelled, will expect the same outcome from themselves in similar situations.

Self-fulfilling prophecies like this are common among children and adults alike: the words "everyone says I'm bad at maths, so I already know I won't understand this" could be uttered by a child in maths class, or an adult grappling with a tax return.

### **The role of authority figures**

In psychology, the Pygmalion effect refers to the potential influence that one individual's belief – often a teacher, parent or leader – can have on another's performance. This phenomenon can be observed when repeated labels are internalised, crystallising into a reality that is then taken for granted.

Experts have found a link between child labelling and the Pygmalion effect, showing there is a high probability that adults' expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies.

This can generate a feedback loop of sorts: if a child's behaviour or decisions are based on external judgements of who they are, they will end up confirming and reinforcing them. These judgements then come to govern the child's own self-perception and, in turn, their expectations of their own future behaviour.

### **Encouraging personal growth: what to say, and what not to say**

It is possible, and indeed positive, to resist categorising children by their characteristics or abilities. We can do this by keeping in mind the impact that our words can have, and by learning to address children's issues through communication and timely positive reinforcement

For example, a young person may struggle to keep their personal belongings and space organised. Instead of saying "you're so messy", we can offer to help them organise or tidy up, or say something along the lines of "try and tidy your room, I'm sure you can handle it but let me know if you need a hand."

Statements like “you are special to me” can also highlight a person’s unique worth beyond any specific achievements. If we want to tell a child they are good at a particular task without rewarding mere obedience we can say something like “I love how much effort you put into finishing that” or “I saw you sharing toys with your friend, that was nice of you.” Instead of saying “you’re talented” we can say “I can tell you like drawing. Would you like to try out some new techniques or colours?”

Importantly, praise and positive reinforcement should come at the exact moment in which the action happens: by giving immediate recognition we reinforce the connection between a behaviour and its positive response. In this way, praise or rewards are linked to the action itself, and not to the child’s identity, personality or intrinsic worth. **-theconversation.com, April 30, 2024**