

Use of Cultural Praise to Nurture Children and the Social – Emotional Tenets Attached to It

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Abstract

The paper explores the use of praise to nurture children and the social-emotional tenets attached to it. Often, praise is seen as an important vehicle to motivate children but the usage of it might differ significantly in accordance with one's culture. The way caregivers or parents encourage/praise their children has undergone a transformation due to a globalized world we are a part of. In a country like India which is culturally rich and diverse, the contextual usage of praise can differ. In the research, a qualitative method of inquiry was adopted to answer the research questions. The data collection was done through observations and interviews from two Punjabi families. The observations captured mother and child interactions and interviews provided an insight from the mothers on the 'usage of praise'. Then, data triangulation was adopted to analyze the data from two sources. Lastly, the findings highlighted that interviewees recognized praise as an important medium for motivation. The data also focused on the generational differences of praise, the contextual differences in which praise is used, and the verbal cues used for the same.

Keywords: Praise, Social-Emotional tenets

Introduction

According to Erikson's psychosocial theory in the fourth stage, Industry vs Inferiority, the child's social influence increase. The social bandwidth increases from home to school, this is when children also develop "self-concept".

Children commended by parents and teachers develop a feeling of competence and belief in their abilities (Erikson, 1958;63). Parents/caregivers are the first set of people children interact with and they play a crucial role in moulding their self-concept. Parenting style is considered an important external factor in nurturing children (Zakeri, 2010). Parents often believe that children need praise to be confident/motivated (Bronson, 2007). Praise is important for motivation, but it should not be vacuous praise. It should be based on reality. The kind of praise children receive from their caregivers construct a belief system, whether their attributes are fixed or malleable (Dweck, 2008).

According to a survey conducted by Columbia University, 85% of American parents think it is important to praise their kids and convey that they are smart (Bronson, 2007). Conversely, India is a diverse land with a plethora of cultures, languages, and religions, making the praising style non-linear and a complex by product of various factors.

This study explores the ways in which Punjabi families praise young children and the underlying reasons for it. Praise is a complex concept which is influenced by parents' socio-cultural beliefs, assumptions about children, childhood, and the goals they have for children. The purpose of this study was not just to document the usage of praise by caregivers but to understand the social-emotional tenets attached to it and the way children perceive it.

Methodology

Research Questions:

- 1)How do Punjabi families use praise to nurture children?
- 2)What are the reasons for using different kind of praise?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to analyse the use of praise to nurture children in Punjabi families and the reasons behind the usage.

Sample

Erik-Erikson (1958:1963) theory of psychosocial development states people progress through a series of stages. The fourth stage around 5 years to before adolescence is the time where a child's social world expands, from home to school. An important characteristic at this age is

development of “self-concept”. Children who are encouraged by parents and teachers develop a feeling of competence and belief in their abilities. On failure of passing this stage, the child might doubt his abilities and would not reach his full potential. In view of this theory, the age group of 6-8 years was chosen.

The sample of the study were two mothers and three children aged 6-8 years, who were from Punjabi families. The first family was of a seven-year-old child and the second family had fraternal twins who were eight years old.

Ansh’s (pseudo name) family lived in the neighbourhood of the researcher, but she was not familiar with them beforehand. Ansh a 7-year-old Sikh boy, lived in a joint family with his paternal grandparents. His mother was a homemaker. He also had an elder brother who was four years older to him. The medium of communication in the family was English, Hindi and Punjabi.

The second family was of twin male-children Gaurav and Gautam (pseudo names), they were friends of Ansh and also lived in the neighbourhood. They both were 8 years old at the time of the observations. Their mother was a homemaker, and a nanny helped the mother. They lived in a joint family with their maternal grandparents. The medium of communication was mostly English and sometimes Hindi.

The families chosen for the study did not have any previous connections to the researchers, restricting any preconceived notions and biases about them.

Purposive sampling was adopted as a specific criterion was to be met in terms of the age group and cultural background of the child. After selecting the first participant of the study, his friend was approached, making it a snowball sample for the data collection.

Tools and data collection

Participant observation was adopted to capture children engaging in different activities with their caregivers like studying or playing a board game.

A total of four observations and two interviews were done. Each observation was of approximately two hours each. It was done in the naturalistic setting in their homes (before pandemic). Telephonic interviews were conducted with the mothers, during the

pandemic. Additionally, an informal interview was taken of the mothers during the observations.

In the second phase of data collection, a semi-structured telephonic interview was conducted with the mothers to understand their perspective about praise. In which they were asked questions about how they praise/encourage their children, manner in which other family members use praise, the difference in the style of praise comparing it to their childhood and their viewpoint on cultural praise.

Then ‘data triangulation’ was done to analyze information from both observations and interviews. Codes and themes were identified that helped in providing an answer to the research questions. Then, an in-depth qualitative analysis was done to comprehend the use of praise in the two families.

Analysis

This section presents the findings from the observation sessions and the interviews with the two families. The three themes that emerged from the data collection are - 1) Mother and Child Interactions 2) Encouragement 3) Praise.

Mother and child interactions

In this section, the interactions between the mother and the child were observed and analysed. The subheadings are – activities children and their caregivers do together, and activities mothers find challenging while engaging with their children.

During the observations, one study session and a play activity with their caregiver were observed. The child worked on his Maths and English worksheet in assistance with his mother. During second observation, we played a board game called ‘Life’. Contrarily, it rolled out differently with the second family. Gaurav and Gautam were more interested in talking to me during both the visits. They did not agree to sit and engage in academics.

In the first family, while playing the board game, Ansh and his mother were competitive while playing against each other. The mother also mocked him in a friendly manner. Discussing the rules of the game, she commented, “he does the maximum amount of cheating” and they both laughed. When the children were trying to skip the mother’s chance in the game; she said, “*rehende, cheating kartey ho*” (let it be, you

cheat). Everyone laughed and cheating remarks continued throughout.

The mother stated, during the lockdown Ansh, his father, his elder brother, the mother and Ansh's paternal grandparents played board games together. She added "her kids are very competitive while playing". She opined that Ansh always aspires to win in the game. The kids keep saying, "meine jitna hai meine jitna". While playing board games parents did not use any direct/indirect praise instead competed with the child.

Gaurav and Gautam's mother quoted, "she teaches a new game to the children and plays with them thrice and then they continue playing with each other." She added, "she prefers chatting with the kids and taking them out for movies or lunches". In the interview she said, "Sometimes board games with them are fun. I even enjoyed doing homework with them, to sit with them and make them understand. Simply chatting with them is also fun."

Gaurav and Gautam mentioned that sometimes they play badminton with their father. While Ansh mentioned, he plays playstation with his father.

I cannot conclude if praise during the activities with the father is an active component because the statements given by the children does not reveal any instance of praise.

Activities mothers find challenging while engaging with their children

This section throws light on the activities, mothers find challenging to conduct with their children.

Both the mothers pointed out to academics as challenging. Ansh's mother stated, "academics, it's the biggest challenge because he just doesn't want to sit down to study. I really want at least for an hour or so he should sit and concentrate, but he doesn't do that". Similarly, Gaurav's and Gautam's mother said, "teaching them something new, like a new concept is a challenge."

As the mother's found academics challenging, cues for praise and encouragement were stated by the mothers which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Encouragement

Encouragement is a motivational technique which helps the learner to learn better by providing support. The encouragement was provided to the children in activities like studying, talking, and playing. The sub-theme which is discussed in this section is ways of encouragement.

Ways of encouragement

An attempt was to observe a study session with both the families. The instances of encouragement were observed from the study session when the mother taught Ansh. The mother provided encouragement to the child by dropping hints like telling him to think harder, by saying, 'it is easy'. But the same could not be observed with Gaurav and Gautam.

Ansh's mother acted like a teacher as he solved a Maths sum. He asked his mother the correct answer, but she told him to 'think harder'. In another instance, they both were revising the mistakes he did in the Maths test. The mother pointed out the mistake and he immediately remarked, "I know it". The mother instantly commented, "that he knows the answer but always does careless mistakes, he doesn't read the question".

After the Maths study session, teaching of English was observed. The child mentioned his favorite subject was Maths and the least liked subject was English. Simultaneously, a transition of praising style emerged. The encouragement increased during English teaching; child asked the meaning of words in many sentences. The mother translated certain words from English to Hindi. Ansh asked her, "*honest ka matlab*" (what is the meaning of honest), she translated the same for him in Hindi. While reading a sentence, he read father, his mother prompted "is that father?" He immediately corrected it by reading aloud "friend, friend".

When Ansh said he did not want to study more, his mother encouraged him by saying "it's easy-peezy". On the other hand, explicit instances of encouragement were not observed with the second family of Gaurav & Gautam. Maximum number of instances of encouragement emerged with the first family during the academic teaching.

Praise

In this section, use of praise by the caregivers to children in the Punjabi homes has been

interpreted. Praise is not always explicit but a complex concept. Praise can have various forms like non-verbal cues, physical rewards like a gift and silent acknowledgements like a smile or a laugh. The use of praise by both the families were different. The subheadings in this section are – praise during study session, examples of praise which emerged from the interviews, and mother's perspective on praise through the lens of cultural and childhood differences.

Praise during study session

Examples of explicit verbal praises emerged during the study session, specifically when Ansh's mother did academic worksheets with him.

During the observation session, Ansh read a note where his friend Gautam was praising him by labelling him 'cute'. His mother immediately warned him not to be too proud. Meanwhile, no example of direct verbal praise could be seen with Gaurav and Gautam. In the interviews, mothers stated that they use verbal praise with their children.

The study session began with Ansh's favorite subject Maths, then moved to English the least liked subject by him. Hence, a pattern of transition in verbal praise also followed. While studying mathematics, Ansh's mother used "hmm" when he said the correct answer. In a question, when Ansh was able to tell the correct answer and said, "it's nine", his mother said "hmm" and nodded.

Whereas, doing the English worksheet, Ansh asked the mother, "can I put 'an' without reading, as the word was ox". His mother said no, "you have to read the full sentence". After reading the sentence he said it's 'an'. The mother immediately commented, "good you remembered".

In another instance, she asked him "*is it, childs or children?*" He immediately answered "children". Mother said, "yes, very good". The child was restless and tired towards the end of the session, his disliking for the English subject and tiredness could have also resulted in an increase in verbal praise. After Ansh completed his school worksheets, the mother mentioned "I did not feel the need of sending Ansh to Abacus classes as he was doing decently in Maths". Ansh added in the conversation "I can do very good maths. I will get a trophy and show". His mother replied "yes" affirmatively. Through the

assertive 'yes', mother encouraged the child by acknowledging his self-confidence.

In the above instances of praise, it can be observed praise is contextual. When Ansh received praise on his physical attribute and was labelled 'cute' by his friend, through a note, his mother immediately warned him. While Ansh's mother praised him in the subject he did not like, that is English. Whereas, the subject Ansh liked, affirmations were provided by the mother like 'hmm' and 'yes'.

Examples of praise which emerged from the interviews

The examples of praise stated by the mothers have emerged from the telephonic interviews. The two mothers were asked to elucidate on the verbatims used by them and the family members to praise their children.

Ansh's mother said, "while studying I've taken charge of his handwriting, if he's written nicely and it's legible, then, I say that "you've written it well, next time also I expect the same thing from you." She added, sometimes she physically rewards Ansh. When he won a prize in the sports competition; she had brought a gift for him. Mother also mentioned during the lockdown he and his brother are having frequent art competitions. So, to encourage his younger one she praises him, "*agar Ansh gande se bhi gande banata hai* (even if draws in an extremely poor manner) I will give him the first prize saying you made it very well". So, even when the competition is held again, he says "*ki meri toh gandi hi banaegi mein toh nhi banaunga*" (he says I won't draw because it will come out to be bad). Then I tell him, "you have done very well according to your age". The extra praise on his art pieces can be because he is the younger sibling and the youngest member of the house.

The mothers were also asked in the interview about the way their fathers and grandparents praise or encourage the children. Ansh's mother mentioned that his father also praises him a lot. He uses phrases like "well done; proud of you". The mother stated, "his father attended the annual day and parent-teacher meeting in school, he was all praises for Ansh and told him, he will do exceptionally well in the next term as well". This happened because in previous meetings they used to get complaints about him being quiet in class. The mother also talked about the way grandfather praises him by saying, "he is

too observant, witty and picks up things quickly”.

The mother of Gaurav and Gautam commented “their father has a similar take”. He also tells them “practice and you will be the best at it”. When she remarked about the praise given by the grandparents, she said, “even they use verbal praise”. Whenever the children try to make chapatis (roti) themselves, their nani (maternal grandmother) says, “it has come out to be very well, they are so round.”

During the observations with the family of twins, no explicit example of verbal praise was observed. The mother acknowledged the child by smiling at his remarks.

Mother's perspective on praise through the lens of cultural and childhood differences

In the interview, the mothers were also asked about the cultural and childhood differences they experienced/observed around them. Both the mothers mentioned their childhood was significantly different. The generational difference was evident in the praise/encouragement they experienced in their childhood and in the way do it as parents. The two mothers did not elaborate much on the cultural difference.

On elaborating about childhood differences, Ansh's mother said, “it was very different, I was in a hostel throughout. So, I have not experienced these things with my parents. Yes, they were supportive with everything. But I think these days we can improve the child overall and to make him more confident, you have to praise him more, if you have to encourage him to do anything.”

Similarly, Gaurav and Gautam's mother stated, “her childhood was very different”. She quoted, “I don't remember my parents encouraging me. *Karliya toh bas karliya, warna tumhare bas ka nahi hai chodo* to my sister as well (if you have done it then it is fine otherwise, her parents used to tell her and her sister to just leave it). This thing really messes up with your confidence. So, I make it a point that I never do that with my children”.

When both the mothers were asked about the cultural differences and similarities they feel in their praising style, each of them had a different take about it. Ansh's mother initially said, “the similarity could be unacceptable words

(similarity could be usage of swear words to praise children). Kidding. We might be very similar I think, we say words like fantastic, very good and things like that”. Here, some ambiguity is observed in reference to use of swear words with children or she might have changed her response due to the formal structure of the interview. While talking about the cultural differences between her family and others, she stated “*that I have not spoilt my children really telling you that ki woh bahut money spending nhi hai, they're not very fussy although eating mein fussy hai but not in buying things and like I know kuch bache hai in my friends who are very brand conscious, my kids might not even know what are brands*” (I have not spoilt my kids and they are not spendthrift. They are a little fussy in their eating habits but not while buying things. They are not brand conscious either, like some of my friend's children)”. When posed with the same question, the twins' mother said, “Every parent is different. You cannot generalize. I have seen some of the parents who praise their kids a lot while some who don't at all.”

Gaurav and Gautam's mother highlighted the individual identity in parenting style keeping the idea of culture aside. While Ansh's mother spoke about money spending and brand consciousness prevailing in her culture.

Anaylsis

The focus of the study was to understand the use of cultural praise to nurture children in Punjabi families and the underlying reasons.

In this section, I attempt to highlight the findings which emerged from analysing the data and the linkages to the existing literature in the area.

As we have moved forward in time, many things around us have changed. Globalization has weaved a new world which influences the lives of people in several ways, especially in a cosmopolitan city like Delhi.

The influence of globalization can be observed more in an urban setup through peculiar day to day activities reflecting in a person's lifestyle, the language they speak, and the kind of praise caregivers use to nurture their children. As I tried to comprehend the concept of praise many parents living in an urban setup consider it pivotal for the encouragement of their child. The mothers interviewed for the research felt *praise* is crucial for encouraging the child. The literature also states, “offering praise has become

a sort of panacea for the anxieties for modern parenting” (Bronson, 2007, p.8). The corresponding example of the anxiety relating to praise was stated by one of the mothers in the interview. Ansh’s mother gives him the first prize even if his drawing was poor and praised the artwork. Whenever there is a competition, he feels demotivated and comments that his drawing will come out poorly. In this situation mother still encourages by praising him. According to my interpretation, parents often feel praising the child is synonymous to encouragement, but praise can backfire too. Meanwhile constructive feedback might go missing through which child can improve. Praise should provide valuable feedback to strive better while insincere praise undermines it. If caregivers emphasize more on the qualities that are innate, they can restrict a child’s view of themselves and the ways they learn. Instead, if children are praised for their effort, they will feel motivated to take challenging tasks and learn from their experiences.

Dweck (2008) mentioned constructive feedback, wherein, she talks about children needs to be praised for their efforts rather than the qualities they possess. This will lead to a shift in perspective where they are willing to take up challenging tasks in which they are not naturally good, but which can lead to fostering an incremental (or malleable) mindset.

If children do not perceive praise the way the parents want them to, the very essence of it is lost. Simultaneously, a conflict can arise if children feel the praise is insincere. “Once children hear praise they interpret as meritless, they discount not just the insincere praise, but sincere praise as well” (Bronson, 2007).

If we draw upon the theoretical perspective of Erik-Erikson even he highlights the importance of providing encouragement. In the fourth stage of his psychosocial theory, Industry Vs Inferiority, he emphasized the importance of providing praise/encouragement to the child for him to develop faith and competence in his skills and abilities. If praise and motivation is provided to the children, they will feel industrious (competent) in achieving their goals. If they are not encouraged, they might experience restrictions and hamper them to develop competence in their abilities inculcating inferiority in them (Erikson 1958;63). Hence, providing praise for motivating children

becomes crucial as parents. The theoretical perspective of Erikson and data from interviews of the mothers, all the sources highlight the importance of praise as an encouragement methodology.

The impact of *generational difference* in the use of praise was also incorporated through the interviews of mothers. Here, the social-emotional tenets attached the mother’s childhood also emerged. Ansh’s mother mentioned her generation was different and she does not remember incidences of praise/encouragement. Gaurav and Gautam’s mother also pointed, she felt deprived of encouragement while growing up, which affected her self-confidence. She would never repeat the same with her children. The reason both mothers mentioned praise as important could be because of their childhood experiences. They did not receive it adequately from their families.

Another finding revealed the timing and *context of praise* as important. The use of verbal praise could be documented, while observing the study session with the first family. Rest of the data in context of verbal praise was collected through interviews. Explicit verbal praise given to the child while studying Maths was less. It was more in the form of subtle verbal cues like “hmm” and nodding to the correct answer. When the mother and the child were studying English together, the use of verbal praise significantly increased. The child mentioned he did not like English as a subject still the increase of verbal praise in the second half of the session could have two reasons. First, the mother was trying to keep the child motivated as he engaged in his least favourite subject. Secondly, the child was tired and not in a mood to study towards the end. The mother even mentioned that Ansh sat down for an hour to study, because of my presence otherwise, he is always tired in ten minutes. In the second visit with Ansh’s family, a board game session was documented to unpack the use of praise by his mother during the game. Wherein, no significance use of verbal praise was observed. Instead, the mother was competitive while playing with the child.

When the child was reading a two line note his friend had written for him. His mother immediately told him “*zyada upar na chad jaiyo*” (to not be proud about himself). Hence, the use of praise and the context also holds importance which the literature does not discuss.

The same mother uses praise differently depending on the context.

Gaurav's and Gautam's mother praised her children when they did well in academics or painting and used verbal praise like "you are a master of Maths or you are a genius". The literature states about the concept of process praise and person praise. Children who hear a greater proportion of *process praise* (e.g., "you did a good job at drawing") may come to believe that the sources of their accomplishments are related to their efforts and deliberate practice. Whereas children who hear a greater proportion of *person praise* (e.g., "you are a good artist") may come to believe that the source of their accomplishments are fixed traits (Zentall & Morris, 2010). In the above examples of praise, quoted by Gaurav and Gautam's mother, she uses more of *person praise*. She is labelling the child as a person fostering the belief system that the qualities are innate which makes them skilled. Although, the impact of the praise on the child was not observed.

The mothers were also questioned about their views on aspects of cultural praise. Ansh's mother mentioned that children in Punjabi culture are praised through *galliyan* (curse words). But then she changed her statement that she praises her children, maybe, just the way other parents in her culture does. By using words like fantastic, very good, well done. Here, the change of her statement creates ambiguity in regard to the cultural dynamics of praise. The mother of Gaurav and Gautam mentioned "every

parent is different; it cannot be generalized." Hence, no clear perspective emerged about cultural praise.

The two mothers were similar in the manner they praised their children by providing verbal cues and quoted 'praise' as necessary for motivation. Yet different, in the underlying reasons for doing the same. The mother of Ansh felt it is important for improving the child's overall personality and making him more confident.

Ansh's mother mentioned that the grandparents of the children often speak in Punjabi and Hindi with them. While Gaurav and Gautam's mother mentioned the grandparents of the children prefer communicating and praising the children in English and they do not understand Punjabi.

Conclusion

The use and style of praise has several underlying dynamics. It keeps changing over time. The language in which the parents praise their children has shifted from Punjabi to English, especially in urban setup. In the same family a shift can be seen over the decades in the ways in which the parents deal with their children and the strategies they adopt to praise/encourage them. Parents have started giving more importance to praise as an encouraging/motivational strategy. This shift might be due to globalization or the experiences by the parents and the social-emotional tenets attached to it. No cultural significance in the praising style could be inferred from the study; the sample was too small to fit it into the category of culture.

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