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Sue Hunt

## Praise Can Hurt

**Praise is a two edged sword. Praise can nurture, but praise can hurt and handicap.**

This is how I learned through a bad mistake, to praise with caution for success.

Many years ago, in my first year of teaching, non-identical 6 year old twin girls arrived at my studio for their first Suzuki viola lessons. Bella, a willowy, blue eyed blond, stepped forward and we played some beginner games together. I was delighted to see that she was going to be a very fast learner.

Having trained conscientiously, I was careful to use **specific, non-personal praise**. Being very careful to talk to Bella's body rather than to her, I complimented her feet on how quickly they moved from rest position to playing position. Her bow hand got praised for making a nice soft rabbit.

"What a perfect bunny rabbit your hand has made. Your clever thumb is in just the right place, and just look at those lovely round hugger fingers." We shook hands to the first Twinkle rhythm. "Wow, your hand did that perfectly, Bella. Well done!" Her lesson finished with a copybook bow and smiles all round.

Then it was Andrea's turn. She was shorter than her sister with intense brown eyes and dark hair. As she stumped forward for her lesson, I thought to myself, "On dear, I'm going to have to be careful here."

Andrea fulfilled expectations while she made heavy weather of working out the difference between rest feet and playing feet. The rabbit that we laboriously made together was more like a stiff little fox. I was at a loss as to what to praise, then inspiration struck.

"Your feet almost found playing feet that time. My, they are working hard. Well done, Andrea's feet." "Look at the rabbit that your bow hand has made. Your hugger fingers are really trying to hang down like rabbits teeth. They are really paying attention to what we are telling them to do." We finished with a serious slightly awkward bow and the family trotted off home with practice assignments for the week and instructions for Mum to praise Andrea for trying, even if she didn't quite succeed. "Yes," her mum said, "Everything is easy for Bella. Andrea has to work so much harder."



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Next week, I was in for a surprise. Clever Bella appeared reluctant and halfhearted. I attempted to encourage her by telling her how quick she had been at her first lesson. She diffidently repeated what we had done and was obviously uneasy about trying anything new. On the other hand, little Andrea was eager to show me how hard she had worked. She was still finding it a bit of a challenge to make her hands do what we wanted, but I praised her fingers for trying.

So it went from week to week. Andrea continued to work with determination. Within two years, she joined the viola group on stage at the Suzuki National concert. "What a worker that Andrea is." her mother would say.

Bella had long ceased to co-operate in lessons and mostly stood passively eyes averted. Her mother and I tried every trick we could think of. "Come on, Bella. You can do it. Why don't you try, just this once, please." After a year, Bella had switched to the cello in the hope that she would find it easier. Her cello lessons lasted only a month.

Long after she had stopped lessons, I had puzzled about this ghost of a child, who while obviously quick and potentially talented, refused to try anything remotely challenging.

That was until I came across research by Carol Dweck at Stanford University. Dweck has shown conclusively that kids who are praised for "being talented" do less well subsequently than kids who are praised for "being a hard worker." The "hard workers" have everything to gain in trying hard, but the "talented kids" had a lot to lose by not reproducing their good results.

This knowledge has made a huge difference to my teaching. In my studio, praising hard work and focus keeps us all moving in the right direction. Even my challenging pupils are beginning to work productively. On the odd times that I slip up and praise results and talent, you can bet your bottom dollar that practice will be skimped and the next lesson will be hard work.

Please remember, praise is a two edged sword. Praise can nurture, but praise can hurt and handicap.

----- *Sue Hunt* -----

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