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Don't Call My Kid Smart

Call her hardworking. An educator argues that chalking up achievement to natural ability sends the wrong message.

NOTHING STRIKES QUITE LIKE the truth, and James Stigler delivered it to me right on the chin with an excerpt I came upon from his book *The Learning Gap* (Simon & Schuster, 1992). In the book, Stigler, a UCLA professor of psychology, sets out to discover why students in Asia regularly outperform American students in math. His research leads him to a conclusion so basic it's downright crude: Asian kids try harder. And they do, Stigler poses, because their culture teaches them that effort determines success. American education believes in ability—you either have it or you don't. The kids we think don't, to them we offer the consolation of lowered expectations, which are generally swiftly fulfilled.

It was all so fraught with sense, it startled and then embarrassed me. I *do* do that. I *have* thought that. With every academic success, I have declared my daughter smart. Why did she pick up addition quickly? *She's smart!* Why are her reading skills coming along? *She's smart!*

She may well be. I'll never tell her she's not smart, but I also know she tries—she is a diligent tryer, and *that*, James Stigler has persuaded me to preach to her, and to believe, is why she is doing well.

It's an over-regard for self-esteem that Stigler points to. Attributing our kids' achievement to their natural ability buoys them—right up until the instant they don't understand something, which they will then figure means they're not smart, or they simply don't have the head for it. And they will quit. Stigler demonstrated this by giving an unsolvable math problem to a group of Asian students and a group of American students. While the American kids gave up once their initial attempts failed, the Asian kids plowed on so doggedly that Stigler had to end the experiment as a matter of decency.



In Asia, students are taught that they separate themselves by the work they put in. Meanwhile, we do it preemptively, sorting and grouping, putting kids on "tracks," and by tagging their potential so soon, we are mapping it. "If you believe that achievement is caused by ability," Stigler says, "at some fundamental level you don't believe in education."

Stigler's book is 15 years old, but it has accrued relevance over time. The rejection of genetics as an excuse for failure is built in to the very name of No Child Left Behind. Most interesting is how Stigler turns stereotypes on their head. It's the dour, soldierly Asians who instill that nothing is impossible, while we, the egalitarian optimists, have designated a realm of the possible, which in fact may be a lot roomier than we allow. **THE**

—Jeff Weinstock, Executive Editor

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