Helping Your Adolescent Think Constructively About Academic Performance
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Sure, students evaluate themselves in terms of whether they perform well or poorly in school, but they also consider why they receive the grades that they do receive. In other words, students come up with explanations for why they perform well or why they perform poorly.

Two types of explanations often emerge (Dweck & Leggett, 1986). One type of explanation focuses on ability. For example, a student who gets an A on an exam might think, “Wow, I got an A because I’m so smart.” The other type of explanation focuses on effort. For example, a student who gets an A on an exam might think, “Wow, I got an A because I studied really hard.”

Both approaches provide an explanation for performance and when performance is good, it may seem that there is little difference between explaining performance in terms of ability or in terms of effort. Explaining high performance in terms of ability might even seem on the surface to be especially complimentary to the student.

However, thinking about performance in terms of ability is a double-edged sword. When students perform poorly, being in the habit of explaining performance in terms of ability can be damaging (Dweck & Leggett, 1986). For example, after failing a test, a student might think “I did badly on that test because I’m just not smart enough.” A student who comes to this conclusion not only feels bad, but also has little desire to try harder in the future. In other words, students who explain performance in terms of ability might feel hopeless about improving their performance in the future—if it’s only about ability, then why should they try?

In contrast, after failing a test, a student might think instead, “Wow, I probably would have done better on that test if I had studied harder.” This explanation might help the student focus on their study skills and improve their performance the next time a test rolls around.

Parents can help students think about their performance in terms of effort by the things that they say to their students.

After your student shows you a good grade on a test or assignment, rather than saying “Wow, you’re so smart!” say, “Wow, you must have worked really hard!” Similarly, if your student shows you a bad grade, rather than saying, “that’s because you’re not very good in that subject,” you can say, “it seems that you might need to try harder next time.” Framing performance in terms of effort, over time, can lead your student to explain their performance in a way that will promote their continued effort and improvement.

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