

Encouragement

“Encouragement is more important than any other aspect of child-raising,” said Adlerian psychologist Rudolph Dreikurs. “Each child needs continuous encouragement just as a plant needs water,” he said. In other words, positive acknowledgment and a belief in one’s capabilities from a loving adult are vital for raising emotionally healthy children.

Unfortunately, pointing out errors and bad decisions to children throughout the day is a strategy adults often use in order to inspire children to do better. As an adult, is this the type of employer you’d like to work for? Do you feel inspired to give your best to an employer that consistently focuses on your faults? Or would you rather have your strengths noticed, faith shown in your ability to learn from mistakes, and your efforts appreciated?

Children are no different than adults in this way. We all do better when we feel good about ourselves and know the unique gifts we have are valued.




HOW WE UNINTENTIONALLY DISCOURAGE CHILDREN

- “No, no, don’t touch. You’ll drop it.”
- “You’re too little to do that.”
- “You can’t climb that; it’s not safe.”
- “It’ll be faster if I do it for you.”
- “You can do better than that.”
- “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you.”

These comments discourage: ‘dis’ (a reversal of) ‘courage’ (facing difficulty without retreating). Our unconscious, daily comments can squash children’s attempts at trying something new, taking risks, figuring things out and learning from mistakes in order to try again with better results. Children may begin to think, “What’s the use? I can’t ever do it right.”

Growing up is an incredibly courageous undertaking. Children live among giant-sized people who appear to be extraordinarily skilled in every area. Yet children keep striving to do difficult tasks no matter how many times they fail at it.

With Positive Discipline, the goal is encouragement: “en” (develop or creation of) “courage.” This goal requires adults to:

- See children as having something to offer at all ages, not just when they are older.
- Remember that mastery of a skill requires lots of practice and mistakes.
- Allow reasonable risks knowing this supports personal growth.

Praise vs Encouragement

Praise and rewards are two other strategies often used by adults to inspire children to do better or to do what is asked of them. It is true that these strategies can motivate children to perform but the success of these tools is usually temporary.

Studies have confirmed that excessive praise and rewards teach children to:

- Depend upon external judgments of others.
- Not trust and seek out their own internal self-evaluation.
- Not take risks or push for higher levels of achievement for fear of making a mistake and losing out on the reward and approval from adults.
- Replace taking pleasure in the accomplishment with the pleasure of the praise.
- Feel conditionally, rather than unconditionally loved.

The end result of a childhood based on praise and rewards is creating adults who mistakenly look to the outside world to bring self-esteem. Or they can have a tendency to only do the minimum required. “If there’s no short term reward, why should I go over and above what is expected?” they ask themselves. Moreover, when children are not interested in earning the designated reward (sticker, jelly bean, money, praise), then where does that leave you?

Encouragement differs from praise in the following ways:

- Acknowledges effort and improvement, not only the end result: “You’re working hard,” vs. “You did a perfect job.”
- Allows children to rely more on inner judgments and less on other’s judgments: “Do you like it?” vs. “I love it!”
- Doesn’t rob children of owning the accomplishment and turning it into pleasing adults: “Your grades reflect your hard work” vs. “I’m so happy you got all A’s!”
- Teaches HOW to think, not WHAT to think: “What did you learn, feel, think?” vs “You did it right.”

GUIDELINES FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

1. **Avoid making the focus on who the child is and how they please you (praise) and instead focus on what the child is doing and how it is helpful (encouragement).** “You’re such a good girl for setting the table,” vs. “Thank you for the setting the table. Now I can serve the dinner.”
2. **Adopt the neutral sportscaster technique: say out loud what you are seeing just as sportscasters do.** “I noticed you put the crayons away.” “I see you put your shoes in the shoe rack.”
3. **Thank yous and appreciations work well too.** “Thanks for following through with that task.” “I appreciate that you didn’t hit your sister back.”
4. **Notice the effort made or the strategy attempted, more so than the accomplishment.** Whether or not that “A” was received or that soccer goal was made, adults can always comment on the hard work and effort put in.
5. **Show faith in children’s ability to improve by refraining from harsh criticism when the end result is far below than what is hoped for.** Ask “curiosity questions” to lead them on a self evaluation process about the mistakes made. “What do you think went wrong? What will you do differently next time? What did you learn from this?”
6. **Acknowledge the small steps taken towards the bigger goal.** Too often we focus exclusively on the end result forgetting that to get there, many steps have to be taken.
7. **Be specific.** “Good job!” doesn’t let the child know exactly what was so good about it. Say what specifically went well for you: “Since you cleaned up so quickly, we’re getting out the door on time. Teamwork!”
8. **Refrain from backhanded, sarcastic compliments.** “Thanks for taking out the trash for once without me having to remind you a hundred times” is NOT encouraging.
9. **Solicit their own assessment of their work.** “How do you feel about it?” Help them develop their own self-evaluation process.
10. **Don’t over do it.** There’s no need to gush over every minor accomplishment. Children could decide, “Dad says that about everything” and dismiss adults’ comments. Or they could become approval junkies. For the greatest impact, portion your encouraging comments out appropriately. Be authentic and genuine.
11. **Offer non-verbal encouragement.** Winks, high-fives, smiles, eye contact, head nods, (or create your own secret signal), can be another way to say, “I see you and I’m acknowledging the healthy choices you’re making.”
12. **Avoid comparative praise.** “Look how clean your brother’s room is!” “Sandy is sitting so quietly.” This is subtle manipulation. It can set up bad feelings between siblings/classmates and undermine their relationships.
13. **Take time for training.** Show children how you want a task performed so they can meet your expectation, minimizing criticism, and maximizing encouragement.



Going Deeper

Not only do children need to gather up their courage to go forth into the world, (taking those first steps, riding a bike, trying out for that part in the play), parents must also gather up their courage. At some point, parents must accept the fact that they cannot save their children from life and its adversities. It is their job to prepare them for it.

Preparation tasks can include discerning what is an appropriate risk to allow according to the age of the child. Then, let go and let them try. There will be great attempts made and some successes; there will be some bumps and tears; there will be spills that need cleaning up, and best of all, there will be the development of a capable young adult who will try and try again, striving for improvement.

Key Steps

- Make encouraging, not discouraging, comments:
“Let’s do that together.”
“Can you climb up one more step?”
“What would happen if you tried it this way?”
“How can this be fixed?”
“I have faith you’ll learn from this.”
- Allow children to try new things that might be beyond your comfort zone.
- Remember children are more capable than given credit.
- Include them in household tasks from an early age. See them as having something to offer.
- Use praise sparingly, like dessert. Let encouragement be their “meat and potatoes.”
- Comments should focus on the deed, not the doer.
- Acknowledge efforts put forth, not just results.
- Be specific with your comments.
- Show faith: You’ll get this, don’t worry.
- Ask: What do you think?
- Avoid comparative praise.
- Don’t over do it; be authentic with your tone.
- Remember, children do better and strive further, not when they feel encouraged.

