

Tomorrow's Millionaires

The Power of Encouragement

Encouragement is a powerful motivator. It can boost your children's self-esteem and help them become more responsible for learning to solve problems by themselves.

There isn't a parent among us who doesn't want to see our child succeed. But encouraging children effectively can sometimes take a back seat in the daily rush of grocery shopping, food preparation, work and getting kids to and from school and activities.

Several things can happen. Parents can end up inadvertently discouraging children by using an annoyed or angry tone, or delivering comments and advice that are heard as criticism. Or they can deliver blanket praise, which child development experts say can be even more damaging than no praise at all.

According to communication theory, the tone in which a message is delivered often penetrates more deeply than the actual words used. And criticism can be extremely damaging -- requiring multiple compliments to erase the effect of just one piece of criticism.

Although this is easier said than done -- especially if you're in a hurry or feeling stressed or harried -- try to monitor your tone of voice when speaking to your child. You don't want them to feel that you're angry or annoyed with them when you're trying to convey support or concern.

Parents' criticism is often well-intentioned, and stems from us wanting our children to succeed and do well in the world, says Ken Barish, author of ["Pride and Joy: A Guide to Understanding Your Child's Emotions and Solving Family Problems."](#)

But criticism can initiate an unfavorable cycle; the more a child feels criticized, the more they'll rebel and resist. Barish suggests taking 10 minutes before bedtime to listen to your child and clear the air about any misunderstandings that occurred during the day.

Praise can also be counterproductive, by creating "approval junkies" who do things only to receive a verbal reward, according to some new theories of child-raising. Praising our kids makes us feel good. It's easy to toss out a compliment and tell them they're beautiful, smart, creative or talented. And it may make our children feel good in the short term, but not in the long term.

According to Carol Dweck, an expert on achievement and success, praising a child for their intelligence or talents is far less effective than encouraging them for their hard work. Dweck, a professor at Stanford University, reached those conclusions in her [groundbreaking 2007 Columbia University study](#) of how praise and encouragement can affect a child's performance.

In her study, Dweck found that students who were praised for intelligence gave up after a failure, while those encouraged for their hard work tried even harder to succeed. Praise, her study found, leads to children relying on external affirmation rather than self-affirmation.

Overly praised children can learn to avoid and resist taking on new challenges, because they don't want to risk failure or disappointing their parents.

Kids can often see through praise. If you're always praising them for something, they become immune to it, yet they continue expecting it. And if you praise your child regardless of whether or not he did a good job, it can come off as less than genuine.

Dweck theorizes in her book "Mindset" that there are two ways of thinking. First, when a child has a "fixed mindset," they believe their innate talents such as intelligence will inevitably lead to success without any effort. In contrast, if a child develops a "growth mindset," they'll view their innate talents as something to be developed further through dedication and hard work. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment, according to Dweck.

As psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikurs said: "A child needs encouragement like a plant needs water." When children feel encouraged, they're more likely to cooperate with others, to share, to engage in classroom activities, to be responsible and to solve problems themselves.

So what is the difference between [praise and encouragement](#)? Praise is simple, usually conveying your feelings. Encouragement goes deeper, and asks your child to consider and explore her feelings, not yours. Here are a few examples:

Praise: "You're so smart; I knew you'd do well on that test."

Encouragement: "You definitely worked for those great results. How does it make you feel?"

Praise: "I'm proud you did your chores this week."

Encouragement: "What did you do to remember to do your chores?"

Praise: "Everybody likes you. I'm not surprised you made Student Council."

Encouragement: "You must have worked hard to get elected. Tell me what you did to campaign."

Another way to think about it: Focus on the process, not the person. Emphasize the deed, not the doer. Or try to simply observe and comment, or offer feedback without judgment. Need more help in providing effective encouragement to your child? Positive Parent Solutions has put together [a list of parenting tips for encouraging children](#) that might help.

It's easy, in the rush of things, to speak in an aggravated tone or let criticism slip. And it can take time and effort to change our communication habits. But it's well worth our effort as parents to take a moment to consider how and what we're conveying to our children and to provide genuine encouragement that will help them grow up to be self-sufficient and successful adults.

Providing encouragement will lead kids to rely on their own efforts and talents to succeed rather than on empty compliments for their sense of self-worth.

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