

Encouragement

Encourage literally means "to give heart to." When we as children are consistently made to feel that we don't fit in, that we are not valuable, that we are incompetent, that our opinions don't matter, then we become discouraged. Discouraged children lack self-esteem and can develop behavior problems, social problems, depression, addictions, or physical ailments. Or they might mask the discouragement with over-achievement, domineering or angry behavior, bullying, or over-functioning and caring for others to the neglect of their own needs.

Encouragement is not necessarily praise. Praise has its place, but it's good to be somewhat careful. Stay real. Suppose your child comes to you with a picture she's drawn and she says, "*The house looks yucky.*" A natural reaction is to soothe her feelings and say, "*I think it's beautiful!*" What message does this send? The child might think, "*Mommy's just saying that because she loves me;*" or "*I must be wrong, if Mommy likes it.*" or "*She doesn't know what she's talking about! I can't trust her judgment!*" A much more encouraging response might be, "*You're not satisfied with the house you drew this time.*" This kind of response does many things: it validates the child's own evaluation of her work, and it leaves the door open for improvement; it shows that you respect her opinion; it shows (if said lovingly) that she is important to you whether or not she performs well every time. The child might then learn, "*Mommy can see I know what's good and bad. And she knows next time I can make a better house.*" Moreover, if you then add some *honest* positive comment -- for instance, "*I really like the colors you've chosen,*" the experience will be valuable and encouraging for your child.

We can also encourage our children by seeing the whole person, not labeling or assigning a strict role. We can all hear the hurt in calling a child "the messy one," or "the forgetful one," but "the responsible one," or "the smart one" can be damaging, too. What about the times the child just doesn't feel up to being responsible or smart? Will he be afraid you will love him less if he goofs up? Will he be able to admit it? Will he be able to ask for help? Even positive labels give a very limited picture of the child. My daughter once brought this idea home to me in a big way when she was about 12 years old. She's an excellent soccer player. She's played all her life and loves it; she's proud of her abilities. But she came home complaining one day that "*All the teachers ever want to talk to me about is soccer! I'm not JUST a soccer player!*" That's so true. And all she needed from me at that point was agreement that, yes, indeed, she's much more than a soccer player. (Watch out for that impulse to defend or explain others' behavior: "*They're just trying to be friendly.*" Doesn't help! Try imagining being on the receiving end of something like that.)

Listen to your responses to your children and others who are important to you. Sure, praise plenty; but also try *encouragement*.

Encouraging responses focus on

- **what** one is doing more than how one is doing
"Looks like you're working on an interesting project."
not -- *"You're doing that beautifully."*
- the **present** more than the past or future
"I can see you're trying to work out that difficult problem."
not -- *"If you don't get that done you'll fall behind!"*
- the **deed** rather than the doer
"You mowed the lawn! Thank you!"
not -- *"You're such a good helper."*
- the **effort** more than the outcome
"You worked so hard on that poster."
not -- *"I love your poster."*
- **intrinsic motivation** more than extrinsic motivation
"I can see you're really proud of that report."
not -- *"I bet your teacher will give you an A."*
- what **is being learned** more than what is not being learned
"Well, now you know all about the hunting habits of the Cherokee."
not -- *"Why didn't you put in something about religion?"*
- what is being done **correctly** not what is being done incorrectly
"You got eight of your spelling words right!"
not - *"You only missed two words!"*