



Cultivating a Culture of Encouragement

“Encouragement is more important than any other aspect of child-raising.”

~ Rudolf Dreikurs

The new school year presents challenges and opportunities for both parents and children. From meeting new kids, teachers, and coaches and adapting to new routines and homework loads to joining extracurricular activities, back-to-school can be a daunting time. While some kids face these challenges courageously, others are easily intimidated and even inclined to give up. In the school environment expectations, pressure, and stress can be high, and these values can make it difficult for children to feel courageous. What can a parent do for a child who comes home at the end of the day tired and with his emotional cup half empty? View it as a wonderful opportunity to develop a culture of encouragement in your own family. By refilling your child's cup, you're growing his courage and self concept so he can go back and try again tomorrow. In the words of Alyson Schafer, author of *Honey, I Wrecked the Kids*, “Encouragement is the universal salve for the human soul.”



Encouragement is a method of communication that conveys that the child is good enough as he is; the goal is to increase the child's belief in himself. According to Rudolf Dreikurs, author of *Children the Challenge*, “Encouragement is more important than any other aspect of child-raising.” While being encouraging comes easily to some parents, others of us need to learn the art of encouragement.

Many helpful articles have been written (see references below), but one important aspect that is often overlooked is the distinction between praise and encouragement. Praise focuses on outcome. As Don Dinkmeyer and Lewis Losoncy put it in *The Encouragement Book: Becoming a Positive Person*, “Praise is a reward based on achievement . . . and communicates, ‘If you do something I value, I will recognize and value you.’” Encouragement focuses on effort, improvement, or contribution; it recognizes the deed (“Thanks, that helped a lot”) rather than the doer (“Good girl!”). Encouragement expresses specific details about what we see, hear, and feel. It fosters self-sufficiency, responsible behavior, and cooperation. Because the focus is on effort rather than achievement, encouragement can be used to motivate children, even those who are feeling unsuccessful, to keep trying.

Encouragement also affects a child's mindset, how your child perceives his or her most basic abilities. In her research, Stanford University psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck found that kids who were overly praised had a fixed mindset (“I'm only so smart”) and

were less inclined to challenge themselves to try solving more difficult problems. On the other hand, those who received encouraging words, such as, "You tried really hard," exhibited a growth mindset and were willing to attempt more challenging problems. To witness the effects of praise on mindset, check out [Dr. Dweck's video](#). You can read more about mindset at her [website](#) and, while you're there, [test your own mindset](#).

At PEP's website you'll find *PEP Notes* on "[The Art of Encouragement](#)," with many examples of statements that encourage children in these ways:

- Demonstrate faith
- Foster self-confidence
- Focus on progress, not perfection
- Build on strengths
- Notice contributions

An important message that encouragement conveys is that mistakes are opportunities to learn and it takes courage to be imperfect. In reading through the examples, you might notice that encouragement has a unique language, which, if isn't your native language, can feel awkward at first. Consider trying comedian Jerry Seinfeld's motivational technique "Don't Break the Chain." Seinfeld draws a big red "X" on a calendar each day that he writes new material, the goal being not to miss a day. You can register at <http://dontbreakthechain.com/> and create your own calendar. Begin incorporating a few ideas from the "[The Art of Encouragement](#)" each day, and don't break the chain. The continuity is a powerful habit former, and this practice can have lasting effects on the mindset of your children and yours as well. Let it rain, for, in the words of Rudolf Dreikurs, "Children need encouragement like plants need water."

"They say, 'Practice makes perfect,' but I say 'practice makes permanent.'"

-Reg Bamford, athlete

References

Bronson, Po. "How Not to Talk to Your Kids: The Inverse Power of Praise." [New York Magazine](#), February 2007 <http://nymag.com/news/features/27840/>)

Dweck, Carol S. "The Secret to Raising Smart Kids." [Scientific American](#), December 2007 <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-secret-to-raising-smart-kids>

Moroney, Robin. "The Praise a Child Should Never Hear." [Wall Street Journal Blogs, The Informed Reader](#), February 2007 <http://blogs.wsj.com/informedreader/2007/02/13/the-praise-a-child-should-never-hear/>

Links

Dr. Dweck's video on the effects of praise on mindset:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTXrV0_3UjY

More about mindset: <http://mindsetonline.com/index.html>

Test your own mindset: <http://mindsetonline.com/testyourmindset/step1.php>

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