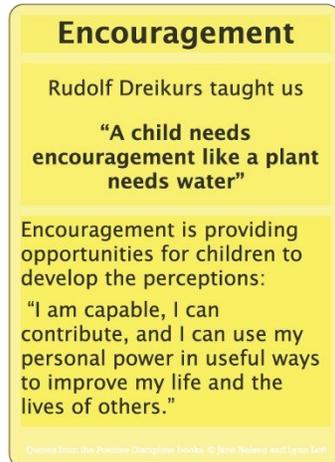


Encouragement: What does it mean and how is it done?

Two Positive Discipline Tool Cards

By Jane Nelsen



Rudolf Dreikurs taught, “A child needs encouragement as a plant needs water.” In other words, encouragement is essential. Children may not die without encouragement, but they certainly wither.

Since encouragement is so essential, it would be good for parents to know exactly what encouragement means and how to do it. Let’s start with what

encouragement is not.

Encouragement is Not Praise

Praise is not encouraging because it teaches children to become “approval junkies.” They learn to depend on others to evaluate their worth. Research by Carol Dweck, Ph.D. a professor at Columbia University, has now proven what Adler taught years ago. Praise is not good for children. Dweck found that praise can hamper risk taking. Children who were praised for being smart when they accomplished a task chose easier tasks in the future. They didn’t want to risk making mistakes. On the other hand, children who were “encouraged” for their *efforts* were willing to choose more challenging tasks when given a choice.¹

As Dreikurs said, “Encourage the deed [or effort], not the doer.” In other words, instead of, “You got an A, I’m so proud of you,” try, “You worked hard. You deserve it.”

Encouragement is not Cheering, Clapping, and Commenting on Everything a Child Does

¹ <http://nymag.com/news/features/27840/> to read the complete article

Parents talk too much. Sometimes the talking is called “lecturing,” and sometimes it is an attempt to be encouraging. A trend today is for parents to think they have to make a comment (in the name of encouragement) on everything a child does. Even worse is when they think they should clap and cheer.

Imagine you are a two-year-old child and you have just poured your own milk from a small measuring cup into a small cup. What are you feeling? When I get into that role, I’m feeling proud of myself – and very capable.

Stay in the role and now imagine your mother starts clapping and cheering? The most popular cheer is, “You did it!” What are you feeling now? When I get into that role it is interesting that I still feel proud. I even like it that

Encouragement vs. Praise

Teach self-reliance instead of dependence on others.

Encouragement invites self-evaluation.
Praise invites children to become “approval junkies”.

Examples:
Praise: “I am so proud of you. Here is your reward.”
Encouragement: “You worked hard. You must be so proud of yourself.”
Praise: “You are such a good girl.”
Encouragement: “Thanks for helping.”

Quotes from the Positive Discipline books © Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott

my mother is cheering. However, when I dig deep, I’m starting to believe I need to do well to please my mother.

Clapping and cheering is a form of praise, and **the danger is that children do like it.** They don’t understand the subtle beginnings of the need to please and/or the fear that they might not – or the power to rebel as the only way to hang on to themselves. All of these feelings and decisions are being formed at a

subconscious level. Cheering, clapping and commenting on everything a child does are subtle ways of making your child’s accomplishments more about you than about him or her. It actually robs your child of maintaining his or her sense of personal satisfaction and feelings of capability.

Encouragement Is:

Encouragement is helping your children develop courage – courage to grow and develop into the people they want to be – to feel capable, to be resilient, to enjoy life, to be happy, contributing members of society, and, as Dreikurs said, “To have the courage to be imperfect,” to feel free to make mistakes and to learn

from them.

So, now I must go back to what encouragement is not.

Encouragement is not rescuing, fixing, over-protecting

What would happen if the mother bird felt guilty about pushing her baby bird out of the nest so it will learn to fly? The baby bird would not survive. How well do our children survive when they don't develop their disappointment muscles, their resiliency muscles, their delayed gratification muscles, and their courage to be imperfect muscles? When parents rescue, fix, and overprotect, they rob their children of the opportunity to learn that they can survive disappointment; that they can survive the ups and downs of life and learn many life skills in the process.

How to Encourage

Positive Discipline tools such as the following are designed to be encouraging to children:

1. Family Meetings where children learn to give and receive compliments and learn to brainstorm for solutions to problems.
2. Curiosity Questions to invite children how to think instead of what to think – and to give them a sense of choice to use their personal power for social responsibility.
3. Letting Go so children have opportunities to learn and grow – mistakes and all.
4. Having Faith in children so they can develop faith in themselves.
5. Spending Special Time to make sure the message of love gets through.

There are many more – all designed to be empowering instead of enabling. A new Positive Discipline tool is called Energetic Encouragement.

Energetic Encouragement

Sometimes, the most encouraging thing a parent can do is to sit close by and keep his or her mouth shut while simply sending out energetic support. A unique feature of Positive Discipline parenting classes and workshops is to use

experiential activities to help parents practice skills and “get into the child’s world” to process the effects of their skills.

In a recent workshop I asked a volunteer to be her 5-year-old who has temper tantrums when she "wants something now." I had her sit in a chair next to me (so we didn't have to sit on the floor) and told her to role-play her daughter having a tantrum while I role-played the mom sending out energetic support. All I did was sit there and watch her with a compassionate look on my face. It was fun to process with her later how she was aware of what I was doing even though she was in the middle of her tantrum. She shared that she felt loved and supported – even though she was a little frustrated that her tantrum didn’t “work.”

I pointed out that when children feel confused because their behavior isn’t “working,” they are ready to go “shopping” for a new behavior. So, even though a Positive Discipline Tool doesn’t seem to be encouraging changed behavior, it may be effective in the long-term once the child decides to shop for another behavior. Use the following questions to make sure you provide an encouraging shopping environment:

1. Are you promoting SELF-evaluation or dependence on the evaluation of others?
2. Are you inviting your child to think or telling him what to think?
3. Are you allowing your child to figure things out for herself or engaging her in problem solving), or are you rescuing and fixing things for her?
4. Are you considering what your child might be thinking, feeling and deciding in response to what you do or say, or do you avoid getting into your child’s world?
5. Are you helping your child feel capable or dependent?

If you can answer yes to the first part of each of these questions, it is likely that you are being encouraging to your child. If not, now might be a good time to start allowing for the courage to be imperfect. 😊