

To Praise or Not to Praise

By Dr. Dale Simpson

Jim Fay, noted educator and author, helped me understand the difference between praise and encouragement. Both words sound similar but there is an important distinction. Praise tends to put the focus upon how we are proud of the other person and how we like what they have done. Praise compliments the successful product of a person's efforts. Encouragement helps the other person see what they have done or could do to make things better. Encouragement makes it more likely a person will persevere. Encouragement connects the effort with the outcome, focusing upon the effort. Praise says "That's wonderful that you made an "A" – I'm so proud of you". Encouragement says "You must feel so good seeing your hard work get you an A....I'm pleased for you."

With achievements, we want to help the child connect what they did with the outcome, and only secondarily reinforce with our praise. When a child has brought up a grade from a C to a B, it is not bad to say, "I'm proud of you." It is better to say, "You must be pleased with yourself. Your hard work really paid off. I am so happy for you." This helps the child see the reason why their grade went up. It did not go up because I am happy for them or proud of them. It improved because they worked for their grade.

What we say and how we react is vitally important when failure occurs. If they have failed in something or have problems, encouraging things to say are: "How are you feeling about your score? I'm sad for you because I know you studied hard for the test and still did not get a grade that reflected your effort. What have you thought of to make things better next time?" In a similar way, "How would you like to handle things with your basketball coach? I'm sure you will come up with something that will work."

Another element of encouragement is to reinforce successive approximations to a goal, to reinforce movement in a desired direction. You may say, "I saw you show self-control with your sister. Did you see it?" You may say this to a child even though that week they may have fought with their sibling a few times. The principle is to reward movement to the goal.

Rather than only reinforcing the content, you can reinforce the process. The process is the effort in the experience. This can be reinforced whether the goal has been achieved or not. "I know you worked hard even though you did not get an award. I'm glad you are learning how to do hard work and I'm sure it will help you in the long run." Recent research confirms that people whose efforts are praised more than their outcome persevere in tasks longer than others.

Of course, correct answers for most things in life are necessary. We can't just reinforce process to the exclusion of the content. A healthy balance with encouragement at the process level will help children the most.

Well placed and limited self-disclosure can also help children feel encouraged. For a child who has attention or learning problems, letting them know that you struggle with focusing your attention and not being distracted could help them. Perhaps letting them know some of the things you do to cope with it can at times be helpful.

Another thing that can encourage is showing interest on a regular basis to the child. The non-teaching parent can ask each day how the child's day was. You can ask what they do in class, what types of problems they do in math, getting them to talk about some details. This shows interest and will help encourage and motivate the child through our modeling of what is valuable. We men often underestimate how important our attention is to children (and to wives, I might add). We need to reinforce the school effort by showing regular interest.

Encouragement deals with perseverance in the face of life's failures or shortcomings. It gives "courage" to face the future and to take managed risks. Schoolwork, taking tests, and trying to learn are all risks. You risk feeling incompetent for the promise of feeling adequate. Praise honors an achievement. This can be reinforcing and can motivate for future praise. But praise without encouragement could leave the person susceptible to dropping out when success is not forthcoming.

I think of how much courage to face the day one can have knowing that someone loves them and is committed to them even in the face of failure. This is a great gift a spouse or parent can provide. Let's do more than praise our children. Let's give them true encouragement and prepare them for tackling life.

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