



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **Parent Guide to Fostering Self-Discipline, Part 6 ENCOURAGEMENT versus PRAISE**

Dear Parent,

The key to self-discipline is respect: respect for myself, respect for others, and the respect of others. Cooperation that is based on mutual respect and shared responsibility is more effective and formative than being controlled by another person. Boundaries communicated with dignity and respect result in true freedom, success, and positive self-esteem. Children who experience positive discipline with their parents grow into self-disciplined, responsible, self-respecting individuals.

Have you heard the adage that we attract more bees with honey than with vinegar? This wisdom applies to the formation of self-discipline within children, too. Sincere words of encouragement, appreciation, admiration, direction, invitation, humor or clarification foster self-respect and self-discipline; whereas nagging, negative criticism, demands, fault-finding, and blaming are counterproductive in the formation of a child. Encouragement is basic to positive discipline, a child-rearing approach based on the psychology of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs. Other aspects of positive discipline include family communication climate, parent authority style, understanding child needs and behavior, addressing the goals of misbehavior, and applying consequences rather than punishment or rewards. These topics were featured in previous newsletters. The focus of this newsletter is the use of encouragement rather than praise in the process of self-discipline formation.

**Encouragement** is a process of focusing on the assets and strengths of a child which promotes self-confidence, inner courage, and self-esteem. It is a continuous process aimed at developing self-respect and a sense of accomplishment. Specific, skill-related encouragement motivates a child internally and helps him to believe in himself and his ability. Encouragement teaches a child how to find his own strengths and special qualities. It provides direction by identifying a specific behavior that the child can choose to duplicate in the future. For example, "It was thoughtful of you to include Susan in the game. That took initiative and compassion" is more helpful, directional, and empowering than saying, "You're a good boy."

**Praise** is an expression of approval which does not identify the specific reason for the blessing. For example, "That's terrific!", "You're great!", "I admire you". Without telling me why my action was terrific or in what way you think I am great or what characteristics of mine you admire, I am unclear about how to duplicate your

respect and admiration. Although well meaning, praise is a type of reward; it is earned. Praise from a parent rewards a child with being valued by the parent. It motivates a child externally instead of internally and, in so doing, serves as a social control or manipulation. In the extreme, praise can discourage and disrespect a child. Over-reliance on praise leads a child to believe that her worth depends upon the opinion of others. When we primarily care about what others think, we allow other people to become our measuring stick of behavior and choices instead of internalizing our own code of values and behaviors. This dynamic is counterproductive to the development of self-discipline and positive self-esteem. The child directs his efforts at receiving the praise rather than at internalizing a life-giving value. Often he will stop cooperating when praise is not received. Some children become addicted to praise and others become resentful and rebel because they feel like puppets who no longer want to live according to the expectations of others.

### **QUICK CONTRASTS**

Praise is earned; whereas encouragement is a gift. Praise communicates judgment; encouragement communicates awareness of the child's feelings or efforts. Praise says, "You're such a good kid". Encouragement says, "Thank you for being patient at the store." Encouragement does not seek perfection. It is more concerned with effort than with results and products. It notices improvement and communicates that the child is accepted, capable, appreciated, and loved for who she is without comparison to others. Encouragement helps a child to accept herself and to develop the courage to face difficult tasks. It can be given at any time, even during struggle, disappointment, or failure. Praise relies on the evaluation of others; encouragement fosters self-evaluation. Praise focuses on the doer, has expectations and is patronizing; encouragement focuses on the deed, expresses appreciation and is respectful. Praise is concerned with conformity; encouragement

demonstrates empathy. Praise uses “should” statements; encouragement asks open-ended questions that involve the child in self-evaluation of skills.

In a book titled *Positive Discipline*, Jane Nelson advised that “the successful use of encouragement requires (1) adult attitudes of respect, (2) interest in the child’s point of view, and (3) a desire to influence skills that will lead the child to self-confident independence” (p. 103). She suggested four questions to keep in mind when deciding whether the statements you make to children are praise statements or encouragement:

- Am I inspiring self-evaluation or dependence on the evaluation of others?
- Am I being respectful or patronizing?
- Am I seeing the child’s point of view or only my own?
- Would I make this comment to a friend?

The use of encouragement is a learnable skill and is clearly explained by the authors of STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) literature. The practical advice and examples of encouragement that follow are those presented in *Parenting Young Children* (pp. 44-52) and *The Parent’s Handbook*. (pp. 33-41). To become more encouraging, eliminate parent attitudes and behaviors that are counterproductive to self-discipline:

- negative expectations
- unreasonably high standards
- promoting competition between siblings
- over ambition
- double standards
- focusing on mistakes

Instead, be intentional and consistent in demonstrating these kinds of behaviors:

- Spend time with your child.
- Show love through touch.
- Say, “I love you”.
- Accept your children as they are, not only as they could be.
- Help your child accept and learn from mistakes.
- Ignore tattling.
- Be positive.
- Develop a sense of humor.
- Help your child see another point of view.
- Have faith in children so they may believe in themselves.
- Focus on contributions, assets, and strengths.
- Recognize effort and improvement as well as final accomplishment.
- Encourage rather than praise.
- Realize that praise can be encouraging depending on (1) the purpose of the parent, (2) the goal of the child, and (3) the way the child receives the praise. Always use praise along with encouragement; never as a method by itself.

## THE LANGUAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Encouragement is the language of love. You encourage when you accept your child and express enjoyment of her. You encourage when you demonstrate that you have faith in him and when you notice his effort at improvement, no matter how small. You encourage when you express genuine, specific appreciation of her or for her contributions. Although there are no required formulas to express encouragement, the following sample sentences are offered to illustrate the language of encouragement.

### Phrases like these demonstrate acceptance:

- “You seem to like that activity.”
- “It’s nice that you enjoy swimming.”
- “Since you’re not satisfied, what do you think you can do so you’ll feel happier with it?”

### Phrases like these show confidence:

- “Go ahead. You can reach the ball by yourself.”
- “Knowing you, I’m sure you’ll do fine.”
- “I have confidence in your judgment.”
- “That’s a rough one, but I think you can work it out.”

### Phrases like these focus on contributions, assets, and appreciation:

- “Thanks, I really appreciate ---, because it makes my job much easier.”
- “I need your help on ---.”
- “You have an eye for detail. That drawing is really intricate.”

- “It’s hard to wait for your friend to come. Thanks for being so patient.”

### Phrases like these recognize effort and improvement:

- “You’re remembering to wash your hands before supper.”
- “You may not feel like you’ve reached your goal, but look how far you’ve come!” (Be specific)
- “Look at the progress you’ve made: ---.” (Be specific; tell how)
- “You were mad, and you used words instead of hitting. I’m glad you remembered.”

### Phrases like these that invite self-evaluation:

- “How do you feel about your work?”
- “With what part of the project are you most satisfied?”
- “What is your special contribution to team spirit?”
- “How do you make a difference to our family?”

May the information shared in this newsletter affirm your parenting style and guide you in the use of encouragement. Through encouragement may your child to grow self-reliant, respectful, confident, cooperative, responsible, and self-disciplined.

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