

# Encouragement in the Family

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by

Cameron Meredith, Ph.D., and Timothy D. Evans, Ph.D.

Encouragement is a fundamental concept in helping parents to improve relationships with their children and to create an atmosphere of cooperation and democracy in their families. It is also a key concept in the development of social interest. Yet, few parents recognize the value of encouraging their children. This article will explore the slow progress made in our attempts to develop responsible children and spell out key aspects of the encouragement process (Evans, 1989).

### **Progress to Date**

Encouragement is not a new psychological idea. Starting with the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler (1939) and continuing with clarification and refinement by Rudolf Dreikurs (1971), Adlerians have been demonstrating and using the principles and practices of encouragement for more than 50 years. However, even today, relatively few parents have discovered the value of encouragement.

One possible explanation is that few parents have gone beyond First Force Psychology (behaviorism) in their thinking about human relationships and never experienced encouragement. Most of us, without even knowing it, have a good understanding of behaviorism. We have been exposed to it for years. Today, as in the past, many prominent psychologists recommend the “token economy,” rewarding good behavior and withholding rewards (punishment) as the secret

Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com

to effective learning and discipline in the home and school. Yet these methods have placed our children in an inferior position, and they have created a power struggle between adults and children.

For example, in working recently with a conscientious father, who incidently was trained as a counselor, it was apparent that he was dependent on punishment, rewards, and control to raise his children. He had established the “token economy” with his family. Though it was not working well, he stayed with this approach. Unknowingly, he had adopted a combination of First Force Psychology and tradition, both of which were outdated and no longer useful. In fact, his psychology was derived from experiments with animals performed more than 100 years ago. This father, with his beliefs, saw no use for encouragement. Children were not to be trusted and needed to be told what to do.

First Force Psychology has remained with us, even though it was seriously challenged by Second Force Psychology (Freudian) during the first half of the century. Unlike First Force Psychology, Freudians have had little influence on parent education or how to improve family relationships. This is because they have emphasized how past traumas determine present behavior and have not shown much concern on how we determine our own lives and relationships.

Behaviorists, on the other hand, continued to influence parenting methods on the questionable assumption that what works with animals and special population groups will work with all human beings. Regardless, both First Force and Second Force Psychology have had little use for encouragement.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com

Fortunately, there was a breakthrough after World War II in which several educators, psychologists, neo-behaviorists, and neo-Freudians challenged both First and Second Force Psychology. Their goal was to go beyond behaviorist and Freudian psychology. They called the new frame of reference Third Force Psychology. Their early efforts culminated in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Yearbook *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming* (Combs, 1962). This has been ASCD's best selling yearbook for 27 years.

Third Force Psychology is a hopeful, phenomenological, humanistic, perceptual, and purposive psychology. During its time of development, Adlerian psychology was gaining acceptance with educators, parents, and some mental health professionals. Consequently, Adlerians were able to contribute many of their ideas to Third Force Psychology, including their concept of encouragement.

Like the Freudians, the development of this new psychology did not make behaviorism disappear. Even though parents were influenced by Adlerian and Third Force Psychology, beliefs from First Force Psychology have been deeply ingrained. While most parents want responsible children. They are uncertain of how to create self-reliance in their children and remain unprepared in knowing how to cope with children who think for themselves (Remley, 1988). When the going is tough, they quickly revert back to the controlling methods they know so well. They equate "good" behavior with responsible behavior. When in actuality "good" behavior could indicate a discouraged child with a mistaken goal.

### **Developing Responsible Children**

Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com

Parents want responsible children. They usually see obedient children as responsible. It is reassuring for them to have children who obey. In their minds, cooperation means obedience; consequences mean punishment; encouragement means reward and praise; and democracy means permissiveness. For them, Adlerian and Third Force Psychology are viewed as impractical, naïve, and lacking substance in the “real world.”

Most parents know how to develop obedient children. They merely teach them to do what they are told, praise them when they mind, and punish them when they disobey. They are often both demanding and caring parents following the principle, “Punishment with love consistently.” However, this is not very effective. As Beecher and Beecher (1981) state in their provocative book, *Sin of Obedience*, this usually results in either obedient puppets or disobedient reverse puppets, neither of which is useful in a democratic society.

In fact, obedience to authority seldom encourages children to think for themselves, accept responsibility, and become interdependent. It does create children who are vulnerable to disturbing behaviors such as substance abuse. Yet most parents cling to the mistaken notion that obedient children will become responsible students and adults. A positive alternative to this traditional approach is the psychology of encouragement which is desperately needed today.

Parents who discover the art of encouragement will see there is a healthier way to develop responsible and self-reliant children. This approach goes beyond the notion that responsibility means obedience and yet it is not permissiveness. It is a way to help children become inner-directed and think for themselves versus being outer-directed and doing what the authority demands.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com

Encouragement follows the principle that the more people are involved in a cooperative atmosphere, the more they become responsible. The more they become responsible, the more they feel a sense of belonging and create a worthwhile place. This in turn increases their feelings of belonging and create a worthwhile place. This in turn increases their feelings of belonging, and enhances the courage they have to participate and contribute. Consequently, the more they participate and contribute, the more they are involved. This is a circular approach to the development of responsible children which feeds on itself and is made to order for the use of encouragement and the development of social interest.

Parents who learn the magic of involvement will readily see that this approach to the development of responsible children results in a more cooperative and democratic family. These parents will discover that family meetings and encouragement sessions are excellent examples of involvement (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984). Creating a family atmosphere which says “This is a place where we help each other,” can provide rich opportunities for involvement.

If parents want their children to think for themselves, assume responsibility, and become self-reliant, they can value the importance of learning about the encouragement process. This will not be easy and risks will have to be taken, but encouragement can be learned. All family members need to become creative risk-takers. Parents can be assured that there is an alternative to control and obedience which is hopeful, helpful, and relevant.

### **The Encouragement Process**

At the outset, stopping our irritating behavior can be encouraging. Most of us know only too well how to discourage. By catching ourselves and not irritating others we can encourage.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com

This includes catching how we verbally abuse others with our nagging, criticizing, yelling, and demanding. By not using these behaviors we will open the door to positive communication and friendly relations. We can also stop annoying our children by refusing to use rewards and punishment. We can realize that people are not for hitting or bribing. This will allow a respectful relationship to emerge. Finally, we can realize how we choose to be angry and how discouraging and useless this emotion is to ourselves and others. Stopping our discouraging behavior will not be enough, but it will begin to place us in a favorable position where we can start using the principles and practices of encouragement.

A major and overriding principle of encouragement is it accepts, trusts, and frees human beings to be fine as they are, mistakes and all. This means encouragers convey a hopeful attitude toward themselves and others with a never-give-up spirit. Encouragement believes in the strength and ability of human beings to determine their own destiny. Given life and time, people reach their capabilities and potentials. In short, encouragement believes everyone has the capacity to reach their potential simple because they are human.

Rather than using precious energy on pleasing, defending, and proving themselves, encouragers use their energy to meet the tasks of life, to learn, and to become their unique selves. They are not concerned with what they should do but instead realize being who they are is good enough.

Mutual trust and respect are basic principle of encouragement. Trusting human nature, self, and others is truly encouraging. Encouragers value human relations more than being right and they value people more then things. They respect others too much to fight with them and

Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com

become their opponent. They also respect themselves too much to give in and become their doormat.

In contrast to fighting with others, encouragers create respectful relationships by being firm with their own behavior and not the behavior of others. Encouragers believe friends trust and respect each other and do not try to change or control others. An encouraging relationship is one where you want more of the same, instead of wanting someone to be different. When people trust and respect each other, they can truly cooperate and reach mutual agreements and decisions necessary for interdependent living. Only in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect will democratic relationships have a chance.

Freedom is also a basic principle of encouragement. Essentially, it means freeing self and others to be, rather than controlling others to meet your demands. Using the words freedom and order means freedom with order, rather than order without freedom, or freedom without order. Freedom and order create respectful relationships where democratic living takes place, and people are free to meet the demands of the situation.

Instead of demanding, ordering, or giving an ultimatum, encouragers offer choices which are especially encouraging. Even with only two choices, children are free to say “no” as well as “yes.” When children are involved in making a choice, they become more committed.

Freedom from fear of making mistakes encourages people to venture and say “yes” to life letting the chips fall where they may. The alternative to forcing children to “suffer” the consequences of their behavior is to free them to experience the consequences of their behavior. Consequently, children will make their own conclusion about their behavior and its consequences.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com

Finally, hope and faith instead of the array of specific expectations is encouraging. Having too high and unrealistic expectations is discouraging. Always expecting children to do better implies that they are not good enough and this discourages them. Conveying a vote of confidence in self and others to do well is implying belief in their courage, strength, and ability. All of which encourages. Letting children know that we believe in them is the most encouraging thing that parents can do.

### **Summary**

Encouragement is key concepts in helping parents improve relationships in their families. Parents can learn to be more hopeful and encouraging. To do this they must go beyond behaviorist psychology and obedience training. Adlerian and Third Force Psychology offers a chance for a real breakthrough. A circular approach to the development of responsible children offers a viable alternative. Encouragement is based on the belief that the more children are involved, the more they become responsible. Through the use of encouragement parents can influence the development of responsible, self-reliant children, and create cooperative and democratic families (Meredith, 1986).

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Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
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tim@evanstherapy.com

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Timothy D. Evans, PhD  
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104  
Tampa, FL 33606  
813.251.8484  
tim@evanstherapy.com