The Tools of Encouragement
By,

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The eminent psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikurs claimed: "The most important skill for raising a child in a democracy is the ability to encourage that child" (1971). Dreikurs considered encouragement to be the single most important quality in getting along with others; so important that the lack of it could be considered the basic influence for misbehavior. Dinkmeyer and Losoncy (1996) concurred that encouragement is the key ingredient in all positive professional and personal relationships.

If encouragement is indeed the most vital aspect of a child's social development, very few educators, counselors, and parents fully realize this face. Encouragement is desperately needed today. Children and teachers need encouragement like plants need water. Learning the tools of encouragement is fundamental to improving relationships and creating cooperation in the home and in schools.

What Is Encouragement?

Encouragement is positive feedback that focuses primarily on effort or improvement rather than on outcomes. Encouragement is recognizing, accepting, and conveying faith in a child for the mere fact that he or she exists. The child does not have to be "the best" to be a full-fledged human-being. With encouragement, a child feels worthwhile and appreciated regardless of the results he or she achieves. Encouragement separates the deeds from the doer so there is no such thing as "good" or "bad" children.

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Encouragement assumes that children are intrinsically motivated and will cooperate and learn for the satisfaction that comes from it.

Encouragement has been *incorrectly* described as "non-evaluative feedback in hopes of gaining compliance" (Kohn, 1996). On the contrary, encouragement is not praise, reward, or language used to gain compliance. Praise is judgmental, extrinsic, and controlling, perpetuating a discouraging superior-inferior relationship in which the child must consistently both please the authority and prove himself/herself. Praise always contains an element of judgment and evaluation. Whereas praise is given only when one achieves "good" results, encouragement can be given any time, even when things go poorly.

Encouragement is founded in Third Force Psychology and Adlerian principles, a hopeful, phenomenological, humanistic, perpetual, and purposive psychology (Evans,1989; Evans,1997; Meredith & Evans,1990). Adlerian psychology has been demonstrating and using the principles and practices of encouragement for more than 55 years. According to Adlerian psychology, encouragement is the process of developing a child's inner resources and providing courage to make positive choices.

Encouragement Is an Attitude

Encouragement is not a step-by-step method or set of specific techniques to make students behave. Rather, encouragement stresses a fundamental attitude or "spirit." Technique alone cannot create a democratic and cooperative atmosphere. The attitude of encouragement rejects the unduly pessimistic view of children and their motives (e.g., "students will likely revert to less cooperative ways without powerful reinforcement or

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recognition"(Albert, 1992). Following this line, to be encouraging, adults must believe that children have a positive desire to solve problems and make changes. When this attitude is lacking, encouragement is nothing more than another technique to coerce children.

Schools and programs that embody an encouraging attitude follow six practices (Carlson, Sperry, & Dinkmeyer, 1992).

Such Programs:

1. Make relationships a priority;

2. Conduct respectful dialogue;

3. Practice encouragement daily;

4. Make decisions through shared involvement (classroom meetings);

5. Resolve conflicts;

6. Have fun on a regular basis.

The statements below contrast encouraging statements that imply faith and respect with discouraging statements that convey doubt and disrespect.

The Language of Encouragement
(Evans, 1995, Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper,1982)

Encouragement	Discouragement
"I think you can do it."	"Here, let me do that for you."
"You have what it takes."	"Be careful; it's dangerous."
"You're a hard worker."	"Don't forget your assignment."
"What do you think?"	"Let me give you some advice."

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"I could use your help."   "When you're older. You can help."

"What can we do to solve the problem?"   "I told you to be careful."

Encouragement   **Praise**

"You put a lot of effort into your work."   "I'm proud of you when you do well."

"You're a fine person."   "You did better than anyone else in the class."

"I know you did your best."   "Next time, if you work harder, I know you can get an A instead of a B+."

Encouragement through Belonging

Encouragement is a key concept in promoting and activating "social interest" and "psychological hardiness in individuals (Griffith & Powers, 1984). Alfred Adler (1931) described social interest as a tendency for people to unite themselves with other human being, to accomplish their tasks in cooperation with others. A person with fully developed social interest knows he or she belongs and is a worthwhile member to the human community. Such individuals strive to contribute and cooperate with other (Dreikurs Ferguson, 1989). The more encouraged they are, the more they have to struggle with life's challenges. In short, those with social interest take life in stride without becoming antagonistic. Schools based on encouragement attempt to develop social interest by enhancing a student's sense of belonging and connection.

When conducting workshops, I ask school personnel: "What inhibits a sense of belonging in your school?" Not surprisingly, the answer typically consists of those things that discourage students: comparative grading, win-lose competition, focusing on

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mistakes, focusing on outcomes, unreasonably high expectations, over ambition, labeling children, and the level system. Together, all of these common practices pit parents against parents, parents against students, students against students, and students against teachers. In short, they create a climate of discouragement.

Shared decision making, on the other hand, in which students are allowed to make choices regarding their own education, can help foster a climate of encouragement. Students can participate I class planning, create rubrics, and work in teams.   They can learn to evaluate this work through portfolios and self-evaluation and can be trained to conduct student-parent conferences instead of parent-teacher conferences. Discipline and planning take place during classroom meetings, which allow students to make decisions about the operation of the class, resolve conflict, and give encouragement. The more students are involved in the decision making of the school through activities such as this, the more they feel a sense of belonging and connection. The more connection they feel, the more courage they have to participate and contribute, which results in a more democratic and cooperative classroom.

Psychological Hardiness

Along with social interest, encouragement develops psychological hardiness in the individual. Psychological hardiness is recognized as a personality characteristic that effectively buffers stress, allowing the individual to function adequately and cope with life's challenges in a way that creates meaning and purpose in life (Kobasa, 1979). These individuals have a positive and realistic view of self, positive and realistic view of other, and an openness to experience (Combs, 1992; Evan,1995; Evans,1997).

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1. **Positive and realistic view of self.** People who feel encouraged like themselves. They see themselves as adequate and are kind to themselves even when they have poor results. These individuals believe whatever they contribute is useful and this alone gives meaning to their lives.

2. **Positive and realistic view of others.** By accepting ourselves, we are able to accept others. Encouraged people have a high degree of empathy for others. They are comfortable with human nature and can allow others to be themselves without controlling them.

3. **An openness to experience.** Encouraged people do not fear mistakes, are open to their experiences, and are free of success and failure. They realize all learning involves mistakes and they view mistakes as opportunities for development. To encourage this openness to experience, John Leanes, the principal at Carwise Middle School, has done away with the fear of failure in this school. He encourages mistakes by telling his students they "fail forward" toward learning.

Discouragement

No corrective effort of a child's misbehavior is possible without encouragement. The worse the behavior, the more encouragement a child needs. Yet, children who misbehave are most likely to receive the least amount of encouragement. Discouraged children need a chance to feel appreciated and respected. Yet, instead of building them up, we tear them down; instead of recognizing their efforts and improvement, we point out their mistakes. Instead of allowing them to feel like they belong through shared

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decision making, involvement, and meaningful contributions, we isolate them even further through carious means of control and punishment.

Most adults are skilled at discouragement, having received more than their share. We have learned how to yell, threaten, nag, interrogate, criticize, reward, punish, and isolate when problems arise. As much as teachers and parents love children, we often end up treating them with little trust and respect.

Our very educational system is mistake-centered, stressing the negative value that hardly anyone is good enough as he or she is. Education promotes this value under the assumption that growth and improvement occur from pointing our mistakes and creating dissatisfaction with oneself. Teachers have been trained to spend much of their day in carious way, pointing our the mistakes children have made. Many feel obligated to correct and prevent these mistakes, not realizing how fundamentally discouraging it can be. As a result, children learn that mistakes determine their value. They learn that by doing nothing, they can succeed in not making a mistake and avoid the evaluation, criticism, and ridicule that follows. Entire groups of students procrastinate and do nothing simply to avoid the humiliation that comes with making a mistake.

What can be done? Half the job of encouragement lies in avoiding discouragement. But before this can be accomplished, teachers and other adults must learn to distinguish encouragement from discouragement. Most commonly, teachers discourage students in five general ways (Dinkmeyer & Losoncy, 1996; Evans, 1989, 1996):

1. Over ambition/ setting high expectations or standards;

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2. Focusing on mistakes to motivate;

3. Comparing one student to other students;

4. Making pessimistic interpretations;

5. Dominating by being too helpful.

The following list of attitudes and behaviors compares the characteristics of

encouragement to discouragement.

Encouragement	Discouragement
Hopeful view of people's nature	Hopeless view of people's nature
Individual's behavior is purposeful	Individual's behavior is caused by outside forces and victimization that may occurred in the past
Satisfaction comes from work, learning, and belonging – intrinsic motivations	Satisfaction comes from rewards and acquisition – extrinsic motivation
Influence without strings	Control, force, and fear
Equality as human beings	Superior-inferior relationships, sitting in judgment
Chatting – talking with	Advising – telling to
Effective listening	Ineffective listening
Recognition, acceptance, and appreciation	Moralistic praise and approval, bribing
Being ourselves, fine as we are	Pleasing and proving

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Challenge, stimulate	Pressure, threaten, coerce
Invite, offer choices	Command, boss
Cooperative atmosphere – helping and being useful	Competitive atmosphere – winning or losing, success or failure
Value and use emotions	Fear and control emotions
Uniqueness and creativity	Obedience and conformity
Recognizes effort and improvement	Recognizes only tasks well done
Courage to be imperfect	Fear of mistakes
Freedom with order	Order without freedom
Natural consequences	Rewards and punishment

The Tools of Encouragement

Listed below are two basic tools of encouragement that adults can use to create relationships with young people based on mutual respect and dignity, enhance a child's sense of belonging, and develop his of her social interest and psychological hardiness (Dinkmeyer & Losoncy,1995).

Focusing on effort or improvement. Encouragers learn to focus on effort and improvement rather than perfect results. Focusing on these elements strengthens a child's courage to move forward. Instead of being burdened by limitations, the focus is on individual progress. *Any* movement is recognized as progress toward reaching a goal.

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For example, your five-year-old son is playing soccer in the neighborhood league. He is hesitant to get involved and unsure what to do. Consequently he stands back and watches the other children play. During the game, the ball rolls toward him. He kicks the ball, but in the direction of his own goal. What can you do? Some parents would correct his mistake and yell at him to kick the ball in the right direction. The encouraging parent would find something of value that focuses on his effort and say, "Did you see the way your foot contacted that ball," or "Way to kick the ball" or "By hanging in there long enough, you got to kick the ball."

Focusing on strengths and assets. When students do poorly, schools typically focus on identifying their weaknesses, limitations, deficits, or disorders. The encouraging teacher, on the other hand, knows how to turn so-called liabilities into assets. An essential skill is recognizing and expanding an individual's strengths, and assets.

For example, 14-year-old Karen is stubborn and rebellious. She wants to do things her own way. When the teacher assigns her to write an advertisement on the value of drinking milk, she does the opposite. She interviews all the students who do not drink milk, and writes on how people dislike milk. Instead of engaging in a power struggle with Karen, the teacher could reframe her rebelliousness as a sign of self-determination and ability to think on her own. Instead of criticizing Karen, the teacher could recognize her desire to be an independent thinker. She writes on the top of her paper, "You display a desire to be an independent thinker and approached this assignment with initiative and

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creativity." By using an encouraging attitude, the teacher can avoid a power struggle, which may allow Karen to reduce her rebelliousness in the future and improve the relationship between them.

Conclusion

Today, in an era when so many teachers, parents, and students feel discouraged and without hope, encouragement is desperately needed. While encouragement is not a new psychological idea, relatively few educators fully utilize this valuable concept. Based on mutual respect and dignity and focusing on a person's strengths rather than weaknesses, the tools of encouragement are essential for creating a stimulating learning environment. As more and more educators are discovering, encouragement is a key element in restructuring and improving our schools.

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