



by Karen Stephens

## Encouraging Words Build Children's Confidence

Most — if not all — parents want to encourage children's behavior and achievements. They dream of building confidence and self-esteem. I've never met a parent who thought it was a good idea to discourage children, and no one ever says their goal is to raise a child with a nagging sense of incompetence.

Confidence plays a key role in children's lifelong success, especially the willingness to try and cope with failure. Rarely is a new skill mastered without trial and error. How many children roll over, walk, talk, or ride a bike on the first try? None. The road to competence involves a series of failures, and children must learn not to fear those bumps.

Parents can help. They can encourage children to have faith in their ability to learn. That faith will fuel fortitude as children plug away at perfecting the many skills they'll need as adults. Unwittingly, some parents discourage kids even when they THINK they are encouraging. Without realizing it, they stir up children's anxieties and fears of impending failure. Kids can become so stressed they freeze, cry, give up, or quit trying all together — a sure formula for underachievement. The cycle of discouragement is completed when the parent becomes frustrated and walks away wondering what in the world he or she did wrong.

Communication can be the root of the problem. A parent's choice of words can set the stage for discouragement. But luckily it works in reverse, too! Knowing how to provide children with encouragement and support is an acquired skill, just like other parenting responsibilities. Listen to yourself from your child's perspective. Are you giving backhanded compliments? Are you pressuring for rapid achievement or immediate competence?

Consider this scenario. You're instructing your two year old to brush her teeth. Intending to encourage skill, you say: "Don't be your usual messy self. Now pay attention and don't let toothpaste drip on your pajamas."

Hmm. How does that sound? It guides a little, but discourages a lot. Rather than building confidence, the comment is a put down and can result in defensiveness. By slightly re-phrasing the comment, you can outline the fine points of tooth brushing in a more encouraging manner: "We don't want drips on your pajamas. Lean over so your drips go into the sink."

There are other discouragement pitfalls. Many parents encourage children, and then quickly take it away by insinuating perfection is expected. "Your soccer skills are getting a little better, but you let all those kids score on you at the end. What were you thinking of? I wonder where your head is sometimes." And here's another, "Thanks for making your bed, but next time straighten the bedspread, smooth the wrinkles, and fluff the pillows."

Comparing siblings is another discouragement trap. "You're good at math, but you've got a long way to go before you're as sharp as your older brother." Talk about a backhanded compliment!

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You've got the idea now. It takes conscious effort in the beginning, but encouraging responses can become second nature. Below, I provide a list of phrases that build children's self confidence. The next time you're at a loss for something constructive to say, they'll give you alternatives. Be sure to choose responses that fit your personal style. If you're not the cheerleader type, stick to low key encouragement. And always be sincere; children easily sense false encouragement. The exact tone of words isn't as important as your intent and caring attitude. So, hang it there, mom and dad, you can do it!

#### Encouraging Words

- Your skills are really improving; you've outdone yourself today!
- How kind of you to share toys with your friend. That's very generous.
- You are taking such good care of your pet. He's so lucky to have you!
- Now THAT'S what I call a thorough job! Thanks for picking up your toys.
- That's a great effort; don't worry about that small mistake.
- Keep at it; I know you'll figure it out. How can I help?
- I love the sound of your voice.
- You are such a good learner! I'm impressed by your concentration.
- I remember when you were first learning that. You've come a long way.
- You're so fun around the house; life would be boring without you!
- What would I have done without you today? Thanks for cleaning the house with me.
- Our car looks spic and span, you're a real professional!
- Great job!
- I'm so proud to tell people I'm your mom (dad).
- You've really improved! That's great!
- It's wonderful to see you so happy with your performance.
- I appreciate your attention to detail. You are one sharp cookie.
- Your patience is commendable. Keep at it; I know you'll get it yet.
- I've never thought of it that way. How creative!
- You're doing a great job of controlling your anger.
- You're on the right track! That's using your brain.
- You've put a lot of careful thought into that.
- Way to go! Excellent! Superb! Amazing! Fantastic!
- Hey, you're getting the hang of it! Your practice is really paying off.
- Now THAT'S an interesting point. Thanks for sharing it.
- Your attitude is a very respectful attitude. I appreciate that.
- You solved your problem; how clever!
- That is wonderful! Your confidence is really showing!
- How sensitive you are to your brother's feelings.
- Your dependability makes life so much easier for me.
- I love your sense of humor. How do you think up those jokes?
- You hang in there when the going gets tough. You're a strong person.
- Look how much progress you've made. You should be proud.
- Hey, relax for a while; you deserve a break.
- What a good memory you have. That effort deserves a high five!
- I really enjoyed your performance. No one could have done it better.
- Keep trying; I know you can work this frustrating problem out.
- How calm you were when you got that bad news. You are really maturing.
- It's a real gift to me when you do your chores without being reminded.
- I have to hand it to you; you did exactly what you set out to do.
- Congratulations, you can be proud of your achievement!
- I LOVE watching you grow up. You never cease to amaze me.
- You are such an interesting person. I can't imagine life without you.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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