

Encouraging Our Preverbal Children

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The importance of encouragement is continually emphasized in Adlerian writings. Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) state, "Parental love is best demonstrated through constant encouragement towards independence. We need to start this process at birth and to maintain it all throughout childhood" (p. 55). However, how this process is put into effect, starting at birth, is not elaborated on. The lack of information on the usable "how to's" of encouragement unfortunately appears to be the rule. It seems that most discussions of the encouragement process are either imbedded in philosophical theory or are geared toward verbally encouraging children who have command of the language. A review of the literature indicates that there exists a need for practical applications of the encouragement process with children who have not yet mastered verbal communication.

The purpose of this paper is to explore and suggest practical applications of the encouragement process with preverbal children. First, encouragement will be defined and some theoretical considerations will be presented as a context for establishing the importance of beginning the encouragement process at birth. Then, the practical applications of the encouragement process will be considered in three areas: the establishment of encouraging patterns of interaction; the practical uses of encouragement in daily situations and in teaching responsibility; and the encouragement process as a context for discipline.

What Is Encouragement?

Encouragement has been defined as "a continuous process aimed at giving the child a sense of self-respect and a sense of accomplishment. . . anything we do that supports a child's faith in himself is encouragement" (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964, p. 39).

It is important to bear in mind that the encouragement process is *not* just a verbal one, that encouragement is more broadly conveyed by our underlying attitudes and non-verbal messages. Although our words may not be understood by the preverbal child, our manner, our tone of voice, and more importantly our underlying feelings do not escape them. The underlying feelings of caring and respect are the foundation of encouragement.

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Some Theoretical Considerations

The importance of family atmosphere in children's development has been widely documented. Children's perceptions of the world at large emanate from their early experiences and relationships within the family unit. As children grow, they develop certain attitudes and convictions about life, themselves, the nature of human interaction, and their own goals and values. Children then perceive life situations on the basis of these convictions, whether or not these attitudes accurately reflect objective reality (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963).

The young child's approach to life situations is in the process of formation. Encouragement, the fostering of a courageous approach to life, is crucial in helping the young child tackle life situations and not feel damaged in self-esteem upon meeting with failure. The child's effort transcends the outcome of a situation, and in and of itself is worthy of parental recognition.

The key to creating a family atmosphere which will encourage the child's development of a healthy self-concept finds its roots in parental attitude. Our attitudes are communicated to our children from birth; thus, the first task in applying the encouragement process, from birth, is to get our underlying attitudes in order.

Establishing Patterns of Interaction

Patterns of positive interaction established at birth can set the tone for productive parent-child relationships. The process of encouragement should be an important component of these patterns.

The non-verbal aspects of encouragement are important to a preverbal child. A hug, smile, laugh, or clap can sometimes do more to communicate encouragement than a myriad of words. However, verbal encouragement is also important, not only for communicating tones and feelings, but also for establishing encouraging patterns of interaction, patterns which will become a nourishing part of the parent-child process as the child gains command of the language.

Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) emphasize the need to use language which will let children know that they have the potential to handle whatever the task at hand. A child who hears "How helpful and capable you are!" senses the admiration implied, and will respond.

Independent behavior can be encouraged at a young age by the simple process of presenting alternatives. It is wise to give the young child a choice, whenever possible, between two items or outcomes. As early as possible, the child can be given choices such as "cereal or eggs" for breakfast, "this shirt or that shirt" to wear, "this toy or that toy" to take to bed. Choices can also be

handy tools in helping parents avoid power struggles. For example, instead of saying "we're going to go to the grocery store now," a parent might present the situation in terms of a choice: "Which animal would you like to take to the store, your lion or your bear?"

It is useful to remember that children are our best teachers when it comes to learning the encouragement process. We need to be attentive to their reactions when we try to encourage them, and be willing to let them teach us what is encouraging and what is not.

Practical Applications

It is often difficult to know just what to do to be encouraging. Fortunately, our daily lives provide us with numerous situations in which the encouragement process can be applied. Finding practical means of encouraging pre-verbal children can often go hand in hand with another crucial element in child rearing, the teaching of responsibility. Dinkmeyer and Dreikurs (1963) emphasize that encouragement of our children is generally most productive when geared toward socially desirable outcomes. We can accomplish this by encouraging children to behave responsibly with respect to themselves, their physical space, and their family.

Self-Responsibility

In encouraging self-responsibility, it is important to allow children to take care of themselves as soon as possible. For example, babies should be given the opportunity to try to feed themselves, hold their own cups (a rubber band placed around the cup will help prevent it from slipping out of small hands), and dress themselves. Encouragement is fostered by such a simple device as placing their clothes in the lowest dresser drawer and allowing them to choose what they will wear each day. Having given our children these choices, it is important not to interfere with them. A purple shirt and orange pants are far less assaulting to the eyeballs than their removal would be to the child's self-esteem.

Space-Responsibility

Encouraging responsibility to personal space can be accomplished by simple carpentry: low hooks in the closet so the child can hang up clothes or toys; the "reachable self" so the child can "get it myself" (including a breakfast of fruit or cereal to allow parents to sleep later Sunday mornings); a door handle low on the door; and a bed or sleeping bag close to the floor for easy accessibility and straightening (Hope & Young, 1976).

There is an important corresponding "carpentry" in parental attitude, that of respecting our children's space as we would like them to do our own.

We can encourage this by knocking on their door before entering their room, and respecting their wishes for privacy and "alone" time.

Encouraging children's self-expression can also become a function of space, as in placing their artwork in different places throughout the house. The guide may not be able to talk yet, but many a visitor will get a tour of the gallery with eager fingers pointing to the walls.

Family-Responsibility

As early as possible, children should be encouraged in their contributions to the family. There are numerous activities in which preverbal children can begin to be involved. Among these are unpacking groceries, emptying wastebaskets, dusting, folding laundry, placing dirty clothes and diapers in the hamper, using the dustmop, putting spoons and napkins on the table, washing fingerprints off walls and windowsills, cleaning up spills and messes, and helping prepare simple foods, such as snapping the ends off of string beans (Kelly & Parsons, 1975). These activities not only contribute to family functioning, but provide learning opportunities for children and, as always, numerous avenues for encouragement. It is important that we as parents explore our own attitudes with respect to these tasks. If we view such chores as drudgery, our attitude will be communicated to our children and the inherent opportunities for learning and encouragement dampened.

Encouragement within the context of family relationships need not be confined to task contributions. Parents can encourage their children through play times in which the parent fully participates, allowing the children to plan the activities for that special time.

In summary, many of the practical applications of the encouragement process with the preverbal child go hand in hand with tasks and activities that enhance self-esteem and teach responsibility and independence as well. Further practical applications of the encouragement process can be found in Genevieve Painter's (1971) *Teach Your Baby*.

A Healthier Context for Discipline

Learning how to apply the encouragement process to life situations also gives us a new framework from which to approach discipline. When limits must be set, a few simple applications of encouragement principles can help redefine a potentially negative situation into a positive one. For example, the use of choices can become a means to avert power struggles, as has been previously discussed. Power struggles can also be minimized when the personal pronouns "I" and "you" are removed from sentence structure. Instead of saying "I want you to clean up your room before bedtime," a parent might say, "Now is the time to put your animals and dolls down for bed." Another manner of removing personal sense in situations requiring a time limit is to

use a kitchen timer. In setting limits for evening playtime, for example, a parent can set the timer and say, "When the bell goes off it will be bath time."

Whenever possible, the "don't" should be removed from parental language. "Don'ts" can have several adverse effects. First, "don'ts" can be a prelude to a power struggle. If a parent says "Don't jump on Grandma's bed when we go to visit her," a new option for showing who's boss has been introduced. Second, such a "don't" can also convey a parental expectation that the child will be naughty or bad. Third, "don'ts" can also be restrictive in one situation to a behavior that we wish to encourage in another situation. For example, if children are repeatedly instructed "Don't kick!" with respect to the family cat, what will happen when we try to encourage them to kick in order to learn how to swim? Creative phrasing and the use of options or alternatives can provide us and our children with a healthier perspective: instead of limiting all kicking behavior, we might say "Kick water, not animals" (Berends, 1975).

Even in the case of the preverbal child, such statements are important, in that they convey attitude, and encouragement or discouragement. There is an ocean of difference between an ominous tone of voice and a firm, yet caring one.

Physical space can also play an important part in discipline. Parents can create an environment in which opportunities for encouraging are maximized, and areas for potential limitation minimized. Much discipline can be avoided in the early years if parents adopt a preventative-medicine procedure of removing "No!" objects and creating safe physical boundaries within which their children are free to explore.

Once again, as with encouragement, the discipline process eventually comes back to the root of parental attitude. Parents must not only construct a positive, encouraging approach to limitation, they must also develop a basis for deciding in just which situations limits are necessary. At the heart of the encouragement process is a gracious acceptance, a permission to allow our children to "be." When their actions are not dangerous to themselves and do not infringe upon the rights of others, we must allow them their mistakes and the freedom to learn from them (Berends, 1975). Stimulating such independence is true encouragement.

Summary

Our underlying attitudes towards our children and ourselves as parents form the foundation of parent-child relationships. Attitudes of caring and respect are the well-spring for the expression of genuine encouragement of our children from birth.

There are many avenues through which we can encourage our preverbal children in daily situations. We can encourage them with words as well as with non-verbal communication; with a family atmosphere that fosters positive attitudes towards life situations; with activities that provide a sense of personal accomplishment and mastery; with tasks that teach contribution and responsibility to self, space, and others; with permission to develop independently; and with firm, loving discipline when necessary.

Quite simply, what we have to gain from encouraging our children is a more pleasant relationship with them, and the joy of observing the development of their healthy self-concept and confident, courageous approach to life.

References

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"You may be whatever you resolve to be."

—Stonewall Jackson
