



Kathryn Zentner, LCSW
8701 Shoal Creek Blvd. Ste 403
Austin, TX 78757

kathryn@bluestarcounseling.com
www.bluestarcounseling.com
(512) 497-2177

Using Encouragement: A Great Way to Build Self-Esteem and Prevent Behavior Problems

Children are precious individuals—each with their own unique personalities, strengths, and needs. Sometimes it’s hard to know how best to “connect” with them, especially when we feel a lot of our interactions with them are based on setting limits and enforcing those limits. But there are actually two parts to effective discipline: prevention and accountability. Usually we focus a lot of attention on accountability—making sure kids have consequences for the poor choices they make. However, the “prevention” part of discipline should get far more attention. When we prevent behavior problems we have less need for the most difficult part of discipline: holding our kids accountable. So, more focus on prevention leads to fewer parenting challenges and happier homes.

But how can we prevent problems with our kids? One of the best ways is by forming a strong positive relationship with our kids through using encouragement. When we use encouragement we build our child’s self-esteem. A child who has a high self-esteem feels lovable and capable. Usually that child has positive relationships with adults and is more willing to accept feedback and guidance. Therefore children that have positive self-esteem typically make better decisions and chose more responsible behavior.

There are several ways we can use encouragement to build a child’s self-esteem:

Notice and acknowledge the positives Usually, a child’s negative behavior stands out, but if we look closely, we can see many positives. If we “notice” the way our son put his toys away, or how our daughter shared her snack with her sister, or how our teenager enjoys shooting baskets, then our children will feel that what they do (and who they are) matters to us. And by reflecting what we see back to the child he begins to be more aware of these things as well.

Make sure your encouragement is as specific as possible Many parents try to encourage their children with a lot of general praise, i.e. “Great!” “Wonderful!” “Good job!” While children generally like praise, the problem with this kind of acknowledgement is it focuses a lot of evaluative judgment on our opinion as the adult.

When we build self-esteem we want the child to feel good from the inside not just from the outside. Therefore, we want a child to decide for himself what is “good” or “great.” If we describe what we see, but leave the evaluative part out, the child is free to decide for herself that what they did is “good.” For example, if a child brings home a paper with 100% on it we could say, “Wow, you knew just how to do these problems. You answered all of them correctly! I bet it took a lot of hard work to learn this so well!” Then the child is free to decide for herself, “Yeah, I did great.”

Encourage your child to do things independently As parents we naturally want to help our children. We zip up their coats, we find their “lost” toys, and we give lots of “advice” about friends and schoolwork. But, sometimes this is too much help. Kids need to hear “You can do it” or “I bet you can figure that out.” Studies over the years have shown that self-esteem comes from mastery—being able to tackle a task and complete it successfully. When we do things for our kids that they could do for themselves we rob them of the opportunity to say “I did that myself” or “I had a problem and I solved it.” So the next time you see your child struggling with something encourage him to keep working at it. You will be surprised that with a little bit of time (and some patience from you) your child can do for herself more than you originally imagined. And when your child does accomplish the task you will be right there to encourage them with, “You did that all by yourself! I bet you feel very proud!”

Accept your children right where they are Children need to feel valued for who they are right now, in this moment in time. This means accepting their feelings and their coping strategies even when we don’t like them and want them to change. Sometimes when we focus too much on the “problems” and making our child “change,” we lose sight of who the child really is. Don’t forget to celebrate your child’s strengths; to notice the small “baby steps” he is making; to smile at her and tell her you love her often. The feeling of unconditional acceptance can facilitate great change.