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I Can Handle This, So Can You

As our children get older they inevitably face challenges--things such as the first day of school, a trip to the dentist, or tryouts for the school play. In each of these situations we want to encourage our children by giving them the "You Can Do It" message--making sure they know we have confidence in them to handle the challenge. However, this is easier said than done sometimes--because WE are nervous for our child. We aren't sure how things will go. We have doubts--we are scared our child really CAN'T handle it! Unfortunately, children can FEEL these doubts in their parents. Our body language and our tone of voice give away our nervousness and doubts. So when we are saying reassuring things such as "Now you don't have to be afraid. Everything's going to be alright", our child is hearing our concern in our voice or seeing it in our body language. If the child was NOT nervous before, or maybe just a little nervous, now she has become A LOT nervous! She's thinking, if my mom's concerned I better be too!

I remember talking with my friend about her feelings about her son's first day of school. It was such a big day for her family--the "baby" was now old enough to go to kindergarten! Certainly, she had anxiety about that. She didn't like entrusting her son's care to a complete stranger. Meeting his teacher at the "meet the teacher" event hardly qualified as getting to KNOW her to the point that she could figure out how she would interact with her son! She felt so scared, and she had to work hard to conceal her anxiety so it didn't rub off on him. She wasn't sure how her son was going to feel on that big day. She expected he would be nervous, but she didn't know that for sure. She knew she needed to be available to help him with his feelings (whatever they were) without making him MORE nervous.

This mom knew that her son being able to handle the first day of school had to start with her--that she had to make sure that she could handle it! Certainly, there were things she could do to help her feel more comfortable with the situation--visiting the school with her son before school started, reminding herself that he liked preschool, becoming excited about all the new friends he would meet and the things he would learn, sharing any "special needs" her son had with the principal, etc. But, on that first day she knew she had to somehow mask any doubts--she had to make sure her son knew she believed this will be a great experience for him. She had to be able to confidently walk away from him with a cheerful "See you after school!"--and not look back.

But, she also needed to be prepared for what to do if he were nervous...to know how to respond if he says, "I'm scared". Certainly she needed to be prepared to acknowledge that feeling and provide comfort, saying "I can understand that. It's hard to do something new." And then offer him a hug, and hold him so he would know it was okay to have those feelings. But she had to resist the urge to add, "But you're going to be o.k." using a concerned parent voice. Because after his feelings subsided, she would most likely get better results if she could look him in the eyes and say--with confidence-- "You know, I think you are going to have a great day--and I want to hear all about it when I come pick you up!" followed by a big smile, and a quick hug, and a fast get-a-way.

Happy Parenting!