5 Surprising Ways to Encourage Your Kids

Posted by janet on Nov 6th, 2015

As adoring parents, encouraging our children should come naturally, right? Not for me. Sure, I knew how to help, coax, cheer my kids on, and I assumed those actions were the essence of encouragement. But through child specialist Magda Gerber, I learned that what actually encourages our children is far more subtle. To my surprise, most of her advice was the exact opposite of what my instincts were telling me to do. Magda taught me that providing true and lasting encouragement is about fostering self-motivation and inner-directedness. And since I had always felt lacking in these personal qualities myself (and wanted something better for my kids), this perspective not only made complete sense, it also resonated with me deeply. Here are some of Magda’s ideas that I’ve tried to practice with my own kids:

1. Don’t try. Instead: Trust.

   Encouraging kids is not as active a process as I had once thought. It’s basically about facilitating rather than doing. Children feel our presence and sense our emotions and intentions, so our trust in them as capable, unique, evolving individuals is the most valuable support we can give them.

2. Don’t cheerlead (“You can do it!”), praise (“Good job! Good girl!”), or coax (“Come on... just give it a try”). Instead: Calm yourself and reflect what you see (“You are working hard on that. It’s really difficult.” Or, “You did it!”). My impulse is to assure my child (and reassure, and then reassure again) that I’m in her corner, rooting her on and 100% believing in her. But what I’ve learned is that children are magnificently aware beings that feel more genuinely supported when we don’t try to push or sell it. I’ve also realized that my impulse to actively demonstrate support for my kids mostly stems from my own discomfort with the possibility they might fail or become frustrated. In other words, my child doesn’t need this feedback as much as I need to give it to her. That was a big Aha for me. So, calming myself is the best way to keep the air clear of pressure and urgency that might make a simple task or struggle seem of paramount importance.

3. Don’t direct or fix. Instead: Be patient and fully attentive, providing only the most minimal direction needed for children to be able to accomplish self-chosen tasks themselves. (I share details in 5 Best Ways to Raise Problem Solvers following this article)

4. Don’t sympathize or attempt to actively comfort frustration. Instead: Allow, accept, and acknowledge feelings.

   Sara shared her experience helping out in her son’s kindergarten classroom (which illustrates points #3 and #4):
   
   I’m in my Dylan’s classroom on Mondays – the kids come to my table to do a little drawing/writing exercise, and I set the intention before each group arrives at my table that I want each kid to feel seen and heard by me... I try to carefully acknowledge each of them when they’re frustrated with what they’re doing or happy with their outcome, and it’s so gratifying watching their little faces light up. One little girl was trying to draw a shirt on her person and was having a hard time... She asked me to draw it for her and I told her I could see how hard she was trying and that I’d give her my full attention while she kept at it... She gave me the most pleased smile, drew her shirt and beamed... When I saw her the following week, she came up to me, held my hand and said she wanted to draw again with me. Melt.

5. Don’t project your own agenda or urge to get it done and done “right.” Instead: Let go and enjoy the surprises.

   Betsy’s story illustrates:
   
   If I had shown my two year old what to do with this puzzle he found at grandma and grandpa’s house, I would have missed the beautiful moment when he looked up at me to explain, “I’m lining all butterflies up to dance.”
   
   Thank you for being the voice in the back of my head, constantly reminding me to step back and let my babies find their own way.

http://www.janetlansbury.com/2015/11/5-surprising-ways-to-encourage-your-kids/
5 Best Ways to Raise Problem Solvers

"Parenting or raising a child is an impossible profession. The most impossible profession. Number one, we raise children with the knowledge of the past. It’s already obsolete."

This observation is made by infant specialist Magda Gerber in her video “Seeing Infants With New Eyes.” Noting the absurdity of raising children for a future that none of us can predict, Magda asks, “And then the question is, if we accept the absurdity, are there certain qualities — human qualities — that will be good for this great unknown future?”

One might not agree with Magda’s view that authenticity, inner-directedness, and what she referred to as a “realistic trust in the world” will always be useful to our children as they navigate the future. But there is one asset we can surely all agree on: problem solving. For as long as the human race exists, we can count on there being new challenges to face and dilemmas to solve. Problem solving abilities will ensure our children survive and thrive, both personally and as part of a community.

The good news: problem solving is yet another competency that our children seem to be born with, so we don’t need to teach this so much as protect and nurture it. Spend enough time observing babies and you’ll notice that they don’t expect life to be a cakewalk. They face physical, cognitive, creative, and social struggles readily when they are trusted to choose challenges for themselves. Practice breeds confidence, and here are the best ways to help children do that.

Be open to the possibilities and provide opportunities from day one

This does not mean expecting an infant to, for instance, self-soothe and then "leaving her to work it out" (a common misinterpretation of Magda Gerber’s approach). Being open to our babies means being attuned and mindfully present — really seeing them as competent individuals. It is noticing when they are working on grasping a toy or finding their thumb and then refraining from following our impulse to "help" when our intervention would defeat their process. The key to gaining a high level of attunement is to practice sensitive observation. We observe and then, when in doubt, follow the magic word "wait." We give our baby that extra moment he might need to figure out how to move his hand through the armhole of his onesie.

When we wait, more is revealed.

We provide the opportunities needed for problem solving practice by slowing down to engage our babies’ participation in daily caregiving tasks and also by offering plenty of unstructured, child-directed play time. Mostly it’s about believing in each child’s unique problem solving interests and abilities, and the earlier we can do that, the better for our child.

As psychologist and author Madeline Levine explains in her New York Times essay "Raising Successful Children," “The small challenges that start in infancy present the opportunity for “successful failures,” that is, failures your child can live with and grow from. To rush in too quickly, to shield them, to deprive them of those challenges is to deprive them of the tools they will need to handle the inevitable, difficult, challenging and sometimes devastating demands of life.”

Trust children, rather than imposing our own agendas

Allow children to address the problems that interest them rather than pushing, coaxing, testing, or creating artificial challenges. Here’s an illustration: in my set-up for one of my toddler groups years ago, I had placed some wooden puzzle pieces (the kind with the little knobs) in a bowl on a table next to the puzzle frames to which they belonged. But rather than putting the puzzle back together "correctly," a two-year-old used the pieces in a manner I’d never have imagined possible. She carefully stacked them, balancing them on their knobs, one on top of the other, until she’d made a fragile tower of four. No more than the four would have held up, and in her experiment she seemed to recognize that. This toddler’s inventiveness and skill building could have been extinguished by an adult directing her to complete the puzzle the “right” way.

Social situations present a plethora of some of the thorniest problems to solve (many of which some of us still wrestle with as adults). Some kids are more interested in socializing then others. It’s an individual process. Siblings provide kids the benefit of a 24-hour learning lab. To help them gain confidence socially, children need our patience, trust, and consistent modeling of positive social behavior. And as with other
types of problem solving, social problem solving is hindered by our adult agendas and projections. When we stay out of their way, our children's solutions will often surprise us. Rachel shared her experience:

"Little win here.

My 4 year old autistic son had been carefully building an elaborate bridge with duplo. His nearly 2 year old little brother has been feeling a bit out of sorts this morning. He charged in, and when my older son moved away from his creation, the little one stepped in and smashed it. I held back my natural instincts to intervene.

I used your sportscasting technique (our speechie calls it "reflecting") and then my older son quickly built up a new structure and invited his brother to smash it. They both giggled as this happened. They rebuilt it together and then smashed it down again. Once my younger son was happy and doing this activity by himself my older son moved to repair his bridge without interference.

Thank you for giving me the tools to allow them to sort this out themselves!"

Don't invest

It's common for children to begin working on a task or issue and then drop it or shift gears, leaving it "unfinished." As adults we tend to be more focused on getting to the goal, whereas our children have a process that is far more open and fluid. So a supportive parent can easily find him or herself more invested than the child is in resolving an issue. This occasionally happens with parents in my classes. They remain engaged after their children have moved on and might try to gently steer them back to finishing dressing the doll or opening the jar or giving the toy to the toddler that had politely asked for it a few times (but then also moved on!). I’ve never seen this work, but it does tend to leave parents a little dissatisfied with their kids. And what I’ve learned about kids is that they know it, and that doesn’t breed confidence.

It is challenging but rewarding to release our adult agendas and simply observe as our children practice problem solving. Lisa, shared her experience:

"I watched my 14 month old daughter “put on” one sandal for 35 minutes. She tried it mostly upside down, backwards and always on the wrong foot. She was enjoying trying to put it on – she wasn’t frustrated – and didn’t need me to fix anything. After a while, she looked up at me, put the sandal in her pocket and cracked up laughing. It was so simple and beautiful.”

Intervene as minimally as possible

Magda Gerber recommended beginning with the most minimal intervention and then gradually doing more as needed. Using the example of a child stuck as she’s climbing, here are some step by step guidelines:

1. Remain calm and spot sensitively but as nonchalantly as possible so as not to invite our child to jump to us, etc.
2. Acknowledge our child’s effort and feelings, perhaps with the reminder: “I’m here to keep you safe.”
3. Give verbal direction. “Can you bend this knee (gently touching knee) and reach your other foot down a bit?” Wait to see if she can do this. If not, proceed to #4.
4. “You are having difficulty with this... I’m going to help you bend this knee and reach your leg down to this bar below.” Always be ready to the let go and let the child take it from there.
5. Let’s say our child freezes or panics, still upset, which usually means she’s tired or that someone has been taking her down too soon. “This is too difficult for you right now. I hear that. I'm going to pick you up.”

Be brave

“While doing things for your child unnecessarily or prematurely can reduce motivation and increase dependency, it is the inability to maintain parental boundaries that most damages child development. When we do things for our children out of our own needs rather than theirs, it forces them to circumvent the most critical task of childhood: to develop a robust sense of self.” – Madeline Levine, “Raising Successful Children”