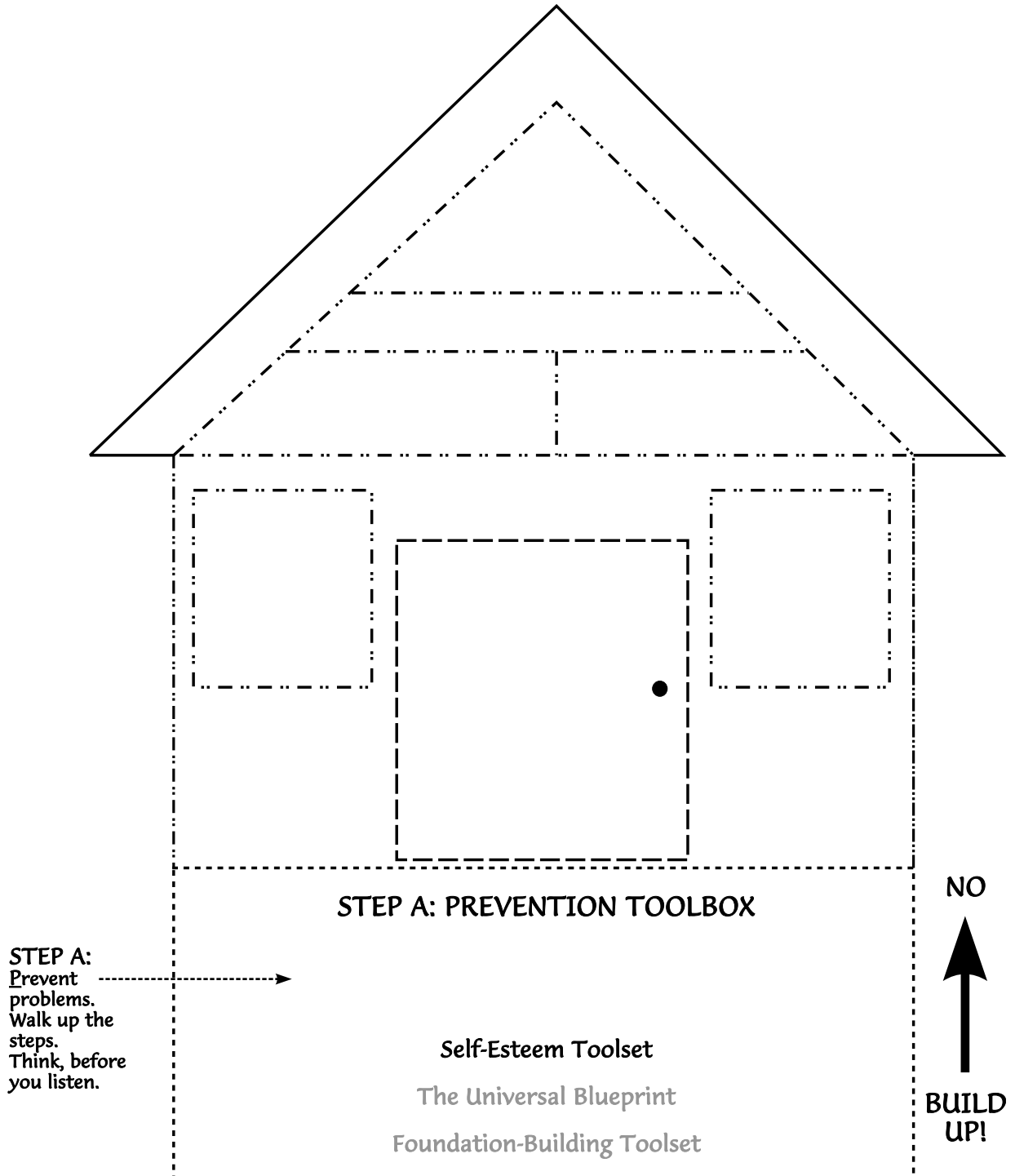


CHAPTER 4

SELF-ESTEEM TOOLSET



CHAPTER

4 SELF-ESTEEM TOOLSET

We can build a beautiful house and decorate it with expensive, fashionable furniture, but if the structure itself is of poor quality, its beauty is simply a disguise. We will be continually frustrated with the problems resulting from its inferior quality. On the other hand, we can build a house that is plain and simple but of high-quality workmanship. This house, while not as pretty or expensive, is more valuable in a different way. While we might occasionally be disappointed by the external appearance, we can feel satisfied that the house is worthwhile and will experience fewer problems.

Likewise, healthy parents help their children feel good about their inside qualities, even when their outside appearance is less than perfect. To do this, healthy parents use specific attitudes and tools, such as those in the Self-Esteem Toolset.

IN THIS CHAPTER

This chapter encourages us to consider three important parenting ideas:

1. There is a difference between self-esteem, self-image, and ego-esteem.
2. There is a difference between praise and encouragement.
3. The attitudes and language of descriptive encouragement are the most effective tools for building self-esteem.

WHEN TO USE THIS TOOLSET

We can build self-esteem *anytime*, when people work hard on a task, do something well, feel frustrated, make a mistake, or accomplish a goal. We can use these tools with *anyone*, with children, adults, and ourselves.

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Self-esteem refers to our *feelings* about our *inside qualities*. This includes our worth as a human being, sense of purpose in life, and how lovable we think we are.

Self-image refers to our *thoughts* about our *outside appearance*, what we think others see. This includes our looks, talents, popularity, or accomplishments.

When people appear to have a positive self-image, we often assume they have high self-esteem. Having a positive self-image is important, but it is only superficial. We can have a positive self-image, but still feel we are no good inside. Likewise, we can feel worthwhile and lovable even when we are insecure about our looks or popularity.

***A Personal Story.** Throughout my childhood, I had a bad underbite. Wearing braces for over five years still didn't correct the problem. It was difficult not being pretty, and my self-image was always low. Nevertheless, I felt confident and capable and knew I had a lot of positive qualities—inside. I did not love my looks, but I loved who I was. As an adult, I had reconstructive surgery and could see some prettiness for the first time. I still avoid mirrors, but the experience helped me realize that outside appearances are helpful, but inside qualities are what really count.*

There is a myth that if parents praise or compliment children, they will become conceited. Conceit is a belief that I am better than others. This type of self-image is called “ego-esteem.” People with high ego-esteem build themselves up by putting others down. Their defensiveness is a disguise for their real insecurity.

People with high ego-esteem often compete with others, trying to be the *best* or always *win*. Egotistical people believe they are *better than* others.

True self-esteem comes from within. When we have a healthy self-esteem we are confident, independent, and willing to try new things. We strive for excellence and try to do our best. We accept ourselves as we are, recognizing both our strengths and weaknesses. We work to improve ourselves, but are not perfectionists; we have realistic expectations for ourselves.

Our job as parents is to raise fully functioning adults, not just adults who appear to be well-adjusted. We are often surprised when children or teens who appear confident run into problems. We thought they *were* well-adjusted, because they *appeared* so. When we use effective parenting skills, we might not have children who are always on time or never argue, because they are human, but we *will* reach our goal of raising well-balanced adults.

ENCOURAGEMENT VERSUS PRAISE

Encouragement is the most effective tool to build self-esteem. If we want to help build positive internal qualities, such as courage, confidence, a sense of purpose, or self-worth, we need to use words and phrases that focus on these positive, internal qualities.

Parenting advice often tells us to *praise* our children, but *praise* and *encouragement* are very different. When we read advice that tells us to praise our children, we need to look closely at how they define or explain praise. Often, what they call *praise* is actually *encouragement*. When we understand the difference, we can avoid common mistakes and use the tools to their full potential.

- ***Encouragement* uses descriptive, non-judgmental terms that cause others to say positive things to themselves.**
- ***Praise* uses judgmental labels that can accidentally cause discouragement or add negative pressure. It focuses on others’ opinions of our worth.**

The way we word statements influences what others say to themselves. Encouraging words cause good feelings, so children naturally *want* to do better. Even when we disapprove of children’s behavior, encouragement lets them know we still unconditionally love and accept them as worthwhile human beings. Praise is a conditional reward and motivates children to do better *if* they can please others or get a reward. This causes children to become dependent on others’ opinions for their self-worth.

Encouragement has two parts:

1. **What we say.**
2. **What others say to themselves as a result of our statement.**

First, let's summarize the eight major differences between praise and encouragement. Then we'll take a closer look at the specifics of each.

PRAISE . . .

1. Gives approval or love if people are acting "good."
2. Focuses on what other people expect or think. It can be insincere and superficial. It fosters praise "junkies."
3. Rewards a job completed or done well. People can use it to control or manipulate.
4. Uses "constructive criticism" to improve others. Expectations are sometimes unrealistically high. It adds pressure to perform or to be perfect.
5. Uses judgmental words that label people or their acts.
6. Is based on competition, being *better than* others.
7. Is only given when people do what the praiser wants.
8. Mistakes are reflections of internal worth.

ENCOURAGEMENT . . .

1. Gives approval and love unconditionally.
2. Focuses on what the *receiver* feels or thinks. It is sincere and fosters trust in one's inner voice and judgment.
3. Points out any effort made, even if a task is still in progress. It focuses on what is right or positive.
4. Describes improvements already made. Expectations are realistic. There is no pressure to be perfect, just to do one's best and strive for excellence.
5. Uses words that describe the value of the job or the internal qualities displayed while doing it.
6. Focuses on cooperation and building on the strengths of each family member.
7. Is given any time, even when people are discouraged.
8. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.

SELF-ESTEEM TOOLS

Some parenting resources say self-esteem is overrated; they are confusing self-image and ego-esteem with self-esteem. Most credible parenting resources talk about the importance of self-esteem. Few, however, offer clear, specific guidelines for how parents can think, talk, and act, without accidentally praising, pressuring, or discouraging children. Here are some specific tools and suggestions to help us meet our goal of building self-esteem in ourselves and our children.



Show Unconditional Love

People can use praise as a reward or to control others. Praise sends the message, "If you do something I consider 'good,' I will reward you by showing you love, recognizing you, and valuing you." While people don't actually say these words, their attitude implies this hidden message.

When we use love to manipulate, our children think we love them or they are lovable only if they are "good." Children are human beings, however, and occasionally make mistakes and behave unacceptably. A more encouraging attitude is to genuinely *accept* children as they are, with all their imperfections, even if we don't *approve* of their choices. Later, we can teach them the skills they need to improve.

Unconditional love is possibly the most important factor in feeling a sense of self-worth. It says, both verbally and nonverbally, "You are lovable. You may be different from me, but I respect you simply because you are worthy of respect. Whatever you accomplish or whatever you do, I will still love you." When people receive unconditional love, they think "If someone can love me even when I make mistakes, I can more easily love myself. Since I love myself, I want to do my best." Receiving unconditional love brings a deep sense of security and reassurance that a few mistakes cannot erase.

Consider God's example of unconditional love. Imagine if God judged and loved us as conditionally as we do others. Would any of us ever be deserving of His love? No matter how hard we tried, we'd probably feel discouraged. Fortunately, God loves us despite our imperfections and mistakes. God supports us but does not rescue us from our mistakes. God is an eternal presence that says, "I'm here and I love you. I won't force you to grow and change, but I will provide guidelines and examples and be here to guide and encourage you when you are ready." We can follow God's example by looking beyond human flaws to the eternal beings inside, who are constantly growing. All people have positive special qualities, though these qualities are sometimes hidden. Inside, people are usually flowers, not weeds. They may be wilted, but they will thrive, if given the warmth of unconditional love to nurture their growth. Only in a safe environment can they learn from their mistakes and begin to see their own potential.

NOTICE THE CHILD'S SPECIAL, UNIQUE QUALITIES

We can show our children, through words and actions, that we love them just because they are and no other reason. This can be difficult if we don't *like* a child's personality or behavior. We can love someone even if we don't always agree with or like the person. It's difficult, but *we* grow when we love unconditionally and let go of our unrealistic expectations to change others.

When our children ask us "Who do you love more?" they really want reassurance that we love *each of them* specially. We can list the qualities that make *that* child special to us. If one child's personality is more compatible with ours, we need to be careful not to show favoritism. Instead, we can focus on each child's special, positive traits.

AVOID THE FAIRNESS TRAP

Trying to always be fair or give equally is an easy trap to fall into. Many parents do this when purchasing items, serving food, or giving time. Being fair or equal develops a score-keeping attitude. Children learn to measure their worth by comparing their treatment to that of others. Children really appreciate our recognizing and meeting their special needs, even if we occasionally treat them unequally.

For example, if your son needs a jacket and his sister complains, don't feel you have to buy her a jacket or spend the same amount of money on her. Let her know that her brother needs a jacket today and when *she* needs something, you will provide for her, too. Don't worry about spending the same exact amount of money on gifts or adding junk to one child's loot just to even the score. Base gifts on the child's individual needs or interests and stay within a general budget.

Instead of measuring amounts of food, give children as much as they are hungry for. Reassure them that if they want more, they can have more. There are two other options: Let children serve themselves, understanding that they must eat what they take. Or have one child serve, such as cutting pieces of cake, and let the other child pick first. The cutter will be sure to make the pieces equal, since the chooser is sure to pick the larger piece!

Instead of interrupting time with one child just because we haven't spent an equal amount of time with other children, remind them that we will spend time with them, too. Base the amount of time on individual needs that might be quite different, but equally important. For example, it might require more time to review spelling words with one child than to play a game or read a book. Avoid giving time and attention to children *only* when they ask for it, either verbally or through their actions. If there is one high-need child, be careful to also spend time with the low-need child. Our efforts can go a long way in preventing low-need children from believing they have to be sick or misbehaving to get our attention.

It can be difficult, for both parents and children, to change beliefs about fairness and equality. If children are conditioned to keep score, they may question a parent's new approach—for a while. Stick with it and help each child feel special and important.

A Personal Story. *When I was growing up, we had two rocking chairs in a little nook of our dining room. When two people wanted to talk about a problem or share the events of the day, they'd sit in this conversation area with a cup of anything and relax. I viewed this area as the heart-to-heart corner, and each chair was half a heart. When we sat in those chairs together, they formed one heart and left us with a warm, glowing feeling. Many times, I said, "Mom, if you ever get tired of these chairs and I have my own place to live, let me buy them from you."*

Recently, when she was preparing to move to a new home, she said she had decided to give my brother and me one rocker each. To my mom, the chairs were just pieces of furniture and she wanted to treat us equally. I was heartbroken—not because I wasn't going to get the set, but because the set, the heart, might be split.

I told her that as much as I loved and wanted those chairs, I'd prefer she give my brother both of them than split them for the sake of fairness. We talked about the hurt feelings that can result from treatment that is "equal, but less." She said that when we were young, parents were told to make every effort to be equal and fair. I dropped the issue and told her I'd respect whatever decision she made. She chose to give me the chairs and we now have a heart-to-heart nook in front of our fireplace.

MAKE TIME FOR FUN

Spend daily one-on-one time with each child. Make sure the time is positive and enjoyable. (No lectures or discussions about Parent problems.) Offer encouragement. Be there to listen to *their* troubles, joys, and detailed stories. Get to know and understand each child better. Laugh together and have fun simply sharing their company.

Schedule "dates" with each child. If other children seem jealous, remind them when their date is planned. Alternate parent-child combinations so each child can count on some special time to be alone with Mom or Dad. Single parents can hire a sitter, trade sitting with a friend, or schedule a date when the other child is participating in another activity. We do not have to spend money to spend time with our children. Here are just a few examples of activities we can share. Ask your child for more suggestions.

- Work on creative projects.
- Have a picnic in the backyard or local park.
- Let them teach you a sport or skill.
- Do activities they plan.
- Take time off from work to "do lunch" and clear your schedule for one hour.
- Bring lunch to their school and eat on the playground.

DON'T USE LOVE AS A REWARD

"Positive and negative reinforcement" is a practice professionals have promoted over the past few decades. This theory teaches children to behave the way adults want them to, to get positive reinforcements, such as praise, rewards, love, and approval. (Chapter 5, "Cooperation Toolset," offers alternatives to rewards as well as guidelines for using behavior charts.) If children misbehave, the adults give negative reinforcement, such as withholding praise, love, and approval or applying punishment.

It's easy to encourage children who are behaving well. But when they disappoint, embarrass, or disobey us, we often say things like "Go to your room. I don't want to be around you if you can't behave," or "Nobody will like you if you behave like that." If we withdraw our love when children are too difficult, they learn we won't stick with them when times get tough. It is during rough times that children most need encouragement. Our attitude and tone of voice can say, "While I am frustrated or disapprove of something you *did*, I still love you."

Like any of the prevention tools, **encouragement is useful any time**. When people are frustrated with themselves, we can send the message "I believe in you and love you no matter what." This message is different from "I know you can do better." The latter implies "You didn't do well enough" and is discouraging. It is also different from "whatever you do is okay," which says that we agree with the

person's choice. We don't have to agree with children's feelings or perceptions to understand and accept them. We may need to set limits on how they express those emotions, but we allow the emotions themselves. (Chapters 7 and 8, the Child Problem Toolbox, have more information about responding to negative emotions.)

Most importantly, give encouragement and show love for no apparent reason. An unexpected hug or "I love you," a pat on the back, a back rub while sitting together or standing in line, or a smile from across the room express love and a sense of appreciation. Such physical touches can cure depression, reduce stress, and replenish energy. In basic psychology, students learn about an experiment in which researchers raised three baby monkeys with three different "mothers": a real mother monkey, a monkey-shaped object covered with fur, and a plain wire monkey-shaped object. The baby with the real mother monkey thrived, grew, and bonded. The monkey with the fur-covered object was very insecure and clung to it. The baby monkey with the wire object died. It is common knowledge among brain researchers that physical, emotional, and intellectual stimulation during the first three years of life are critical, because it stimulates brain growth and development. Neglected children, who have not been regularly held and talked to, have less brain matter than children who receive this stimulation. In severe cases, neglected children's brains actually shrunk. The first three years set the stage for the child's personality, emotional bonding or attachment, and ability to learn.

Touch is a basic biological need. We need it to survive, and it is most fulfilling when there are no strings attached.



Focus on Self-Motivation, Not People-Pleasing ☆☆☆☆

Many parents were raised with the belief that children should want to please their parents and that this desire is an important motivator. We act on this belief when we make statements such as, "I'm so proud of you," "You make me happy when you get good grades," or "Your teacher said you're a good speller." Most parents see nothing wrong with children trying to please others, especially if they are trying to please the parents. But let's look at the long-term effects:

- **Praise creates "praise junkies"** because it's addictive. Over time, some children do things just for the praise and recognition they get, rather than the value of the act or the good feelings *they* get. They come to expect praise and appreciation for everything they do. If they don't get praise, they question their worth and whether they did a good job. Others may feel they have no reason to cooperate if they won't get praise or a reward. They think "What's in it for me? If nobody notices what I do, why should I bother?" While these children may behave well, their motivation is to seek approval from others.
- **Praise promotes unhealthy pride.** Praise often shifts the focus from the pride or pleasure *children* feel in their accomplishments to pleasing someone else. Saying "I'm so proud of you" may be misinterpreted by children in several ways: "You make *me* look good," "Your job is to make *me* happy," or "You please me by doing what *I* want." While children may be glad they pleased someone else, pleasing others deflates what *they* feel. Instead, use words that focus on how *children* feel. "I bet it feels great to get a good grade after putting such hard work into it" or "You've really come a long way! It's exciting to see you do that on your own."

A Graduate's Story. It took my son, Mark, age 4, many months to learn how to swim. He'd hesitate for nearly 5 minutes before he jumped in the water and took 2 weeks to get his face wet. Months later, when he swam across the pool all by himself, stroking and breathing correctly, I was thrilled! I waited for him at the pool's ladder, ready to give him a hug. As he rose out of the water, he had the biggest grin of satisfaction on his face. I said, "Oh Mark,

I'm so proud of you!" He immediately stopped smiling and looked disappointed, as though I'd taken away his hard-earned accomplishment! Until that moment, I didn't understand (or believe) why those words were so discouraging. It's really important to Mark to do things on his own and he often resists doing things just to please me. While I'm often proud of Mark's accomplishments, I am careful to focus on his feelings about what he did.

Children need to learn how to handle discouragement well. We want our children to say to themselves, "Maybe I didn't do as well as I hoped I would, but I know I did my best and improved. If I keep trying, I will eventually get it." Our children will say these things to themselves, if we focus on the value of their deeds, rather than whom they pleased.

Unhealthy pride is thinking we are better than others.

Healthy pride is an inner sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that we've done our best.

- **Praise can bring on resistance.** Praise can be manipulative and controlling, as in "You're a big boy now. You should be able to go on the potty by yourself!" When some children catch on to their parent's hidden motive, they refuse to cooperate, viewing it as giving in. Instead of feeling more motivated, they feel resistant and resentful.
- **Praise increases the risk that children will follow negative peer pressure.** When children try to please us, their parents, we usually don't mind. As children approach their teen years, however, they give greater value to what their friends think. This is a healthy and necessary part of becoming an adult. Children who make decisions to please others are more likely to try pleasing their peers by going along with the crowd. We want our children to *resist* negative peer pressure. We hope our children will have the courage to say "I don't care if you think I'm not cool or won't be my friend, I'm not going to do that!"

If we want to avoid these pitfalls and develop self-motivation in our children and others, there are several things we can do.

ASK THE CHILD'S OPINION

Encouraging statements use words that focus on children's opinions or feelings about their efforts, instead of relying on others' approval. When children think their ideas are important and they have something to contribute, they feel useful and valued. Ask questions such as "What do you think?" or make comments like "I can tell you're pleased with it." These statements tell children that their opinions are important and they are capable of judging their own work. If we value their opinions and skills, they are more willing to trust their *own* judgment and abilities.

A Personal Story. When I was a teen and struggling with a decision, I would sometimes ask my parents what I should do. They would first ask me what I thought and listen to my ideas. They might offer advice, if I asked for it, and end by saying, "Well, I know you have a good head on your shoulders. I trust your judgment. I know you'll work it out." I would think to myself, "If they think I have good judgment, they must see something I don't see. If they see it, it must be there! If they trust my judgment, then so can I." When faced with tough decisions, especially as a teen, I always tried a little harder to use that "good head on my shoulders." It saved me from many mistakes and I learned to trust myself, my opinions, and my inner voice.

When children ask, "Did I do a good job?" first ask, "What do you think?" Or "Tell me what you like about it." If children are persistent in wanting your opinion simply describe what you like. "Well, I think _____, but you can decide for yourself."



See the Positive ☆☆☆☆

There will always be events or behaviors that we have little or no control over. We learned in Chapter 2, “Foundation-Building Toolset,” that our beliefs and interpretations of these events greatly affect our response. We can view situations negatively or positively—the choice is ours. It’s like looking at our cup as half full, instead of half empty.

What we see (and look at) is what we get. If we spend 75 percent of our time and energy noticing negative behavior, that will soon be all we see. If this is the only behavior we comment on, children begin to see themselves as bad people. On the other hand, if we spend our time and energy looking for and pointing out positive behavior, we begin seeing more of it. This does not mean we do nothing about negative behavior; we just make an extra effort to notice positive behavior. As we point out the positive and choose our reaction to the negative, children see themselves more positively. Feeling encouraged, they try harder to avoid mistakes and learn from those they can’t avoid. They feel like worthwhile people who occasionally make mistakes.

It usually takes more time and effort to look for positive behavior than to notice negative behavior. When all is going well, we don’t want to rock the boat or distract children from their good behavior—so we say nothing. We need to make a conscious effort to pay more attention to positive behaviors and choose how we interpret negative behaviors. Here are some suggestions:

FOCUS ON WHAT IS RIGHT

Always point out what children do right, even if part of what they did was “wrong.” Consider carefully whether the negative is important enough to even comment on. Often, when we simply notice the positive and ignore the negative, the negative disappears. If the negative is too difficult to ignore, downplay it, focusing mostly on the positive. For example, if your daughter is chattering away in church as she draws a picture, say “You’re having fun *and* keeping yourself busy. Just remember to whisper.”

A Graduate’s Story. Since I learned about encouragement, I have been trying to focus on the positive with my son. His teacher, however, grades papers by putting how many points he missed. Instead of seeing a 95% grade, he sees -5. He gets really upset, can only focus on his mistakes, and is becoming more discouraged. I have tried pointing out what he did right and even remarked papers in more positive ways. Finally, I talked to the teacher. I pointed out how discouraged my son feels when his mistakes are pointed out, without giving him credit for all he did right. I explained what I do to be more encouraging and how I marked his papers with a positive grade. She didn’t realize such a small thing was making such a negative impact. She changed her grading and my son immediately changed his attitude. He’s enjoying school again and isn’t being so hard on himself for his mistakes.

SEND POSITIVE MESSAGES TO CHILDREN

Even when children are doing nothing in particular, positive or negative, send positive thoughts their way or give an unexpected positive stroke. Notes of encouragement are very powerful. If children save the letter or note, they can refer to it anytime they want to remind themselves of their good qualities. We can use special cards, sticky notes, or stickers. We can leave them in lunch boxes, on a mirror, next to phone messages, on the refrigerator with a magnet, or on bed pillows. If we use the tips and tools from this toolset, we can create special reminders of how much we love them and how special they are to us.

RECOGNIZE WHAT CHILDREN DO WELL

We can show interest in areas that our children are interested in, even if these interests aren’t important to us. If our children have a special skill or talent, we can find ways to let them help the family and ask for their opinions and advice.

- ▶ “I need someone with a small hand to reach behind the couch. Could you help?”
- ▶ “I can never seem to balance my checkbook. Would you look at my math and see if you can find the mistakes? I am amazed at the way you do math in your head so well.”
- ▶ “You have such rhythm. Could you show me a few steps I can use when Daddy and I go dancing next weekend?”

DESCRIBE HOW CHILDREN'S EFFORTS HELP OTHERS

We need to give children responsibilities that are age-appropriate and build on their strengths. When children are helpful, avoid thanking them for *pleasing* you (their job is not to make us happy) and point out how it *helped* you, the family, or others.

- ▶ “The bathroom faucets really shine! I bet our guests will enjoy using such a clean restroom. Thanks for being so thorough.”
- ▶ “Thanks for collecting all the trash and carrying out the cans. I didn't realize how heavy they were! My back appreciates your help!”
- ▶ “I'm so glad you were here when baby Mikey came to visit. He would have been into everything if you hadn't kept him so busy. He likes playing with you. You're so patient with him.”

NOTICE EFFORT

When children put forth effort and think they've failed in spite of their efforts, they feel discouraged. Acknowledge any effort children make, even if they or their efforts aren't totally successful.

A Personal Story. When I was about 13, I decided to bake biscuits for my parents while they were at a meeting. The recipe called for cream of tartar, but I couldn't find any ingredient by that name. I thought, “Here's some tartar sauce! Maybe they make it by adding water to cream of tartar. If I use this and less water, it might be a good substitute.”

When my parents came home, they were pleasantly surprised that I took the initiative to cook something for them. Then they tasted my creation. They controlled their facial expressions as they tried to swallow their first bite. (I'm impressed they could do it!) Without a hint of disappointment or disapproval my mother politely asked me “What recipe did you use?” I told them the problem and my logical substitution. My mom put her arm around my shoulder and showed me the cream of tartar in the cabinet.

She said, “I can see how you thought tartar sauce might work. Have you tasted the biscuits to see if your theory worked?” “Why no!” I proudly stated with a smile, “I wanted you to be the first to taste them.” “Here,” she said, “try one.” It was awful! I spit it out immediately and threw the remaining biscuits in the trash. While I was embarrassed by my mistake, I was more impressed that my parents appreciated the thought behind my gift and handled my mistake so tactfully.

By showing children we believe in them, they picture themselves having a quality and naturally develop more of that quality. We can point out times when we've seen our children handle a situation well, even if only part of their decision was responsible. For example, “I can see you regret going to that party, but you showed good judgment by leaving when those kids started trouble.”

NOTICE IMPROVEMENT

Parents can give praise only after children complete a task and only for the part that was successful. We can give encouragement, however, at each step of the process, with or without any sign of improvement.

- ▶ “Wow! You got to touch the basketball three times this game!”
- ▶ “I can tell your trumpet playing has improved. That song is so smooth and clear.”
- ▶ “You might not feel comfortable driving on the freeway yet, but look how well you handled the left turn back at that busy intersection.”

Sometimes, the *absence* of negative behavior is the very behavior we want to notice. Don't hesitate to comment at these times.

A Parenting Class Discussion. *A foster mother and her teenage daughter took my Parents and Teens—Together class. I asked what positive behaviors the parents had noticed that week. The mother said she hadn't noticed her daughter behaving positively. The daughter said, "But we haven't argued in three weeks!" The mother acknowledge this was true. The daughter's eyes welled up with tears as she added, "You have no idea how hard I've been trying to avoid arguments." I commented that positive behavior isn't always obvious. Sometimes the absence of negative behavior is a sign of effort and improvement. When we don't notice this positive behavior, children feel more discouraged. The daughter nodded. The mother looked surprised and then got an "Aha!" look on her face. "I never thought about it that way before," she said. She put her arm around her daughter and said "Thanks for trying so hard." The foster daughter relaxed as tears ran down her face. "Thanks for noticing," she said.*

AVOID REMINDING CHILDREN OF PAST MISTAKES OR WEAKNESSES

If we give encouragement, but add a negative comment, it cancels the positive effect. Focus on the child's strength, without mentioning past failures:

- ▶ Change "Your room *finally* looks clean" to an encouraging statement by taking out finally and describing how clean it is.
- ▶ Don't say, "The lawn looks nice. I can't see any spots you missed *this time*." Show your appreciation without the criticism, "Thanks for mowing the lawn, it looks nice and even."
- ▶ Don't say, "You really worked hard on that project. If you put that kind of effort into all your work, you'd be an 'A' student!" Instead, say "I bet it feels good to know your hard work paid off."
- ▶ Surprisingly, it's discouraging for children to hear, "You did it! See what you can do *if you try*?" The last part of the sentence implies they haven't tried in the past. Eliminate the last sentence, simply saying, "You did it! You tried and tried, and didn't give up."

AVOID "CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM"

Constructive criticism is a contradictory term—constructive means to build up; criticism tears down. Parents often think if they point out mistakes, children will want to improve. This approach is rarely effective. As soon as people hear, "You did a good job *but...*" they prepare to defend themselves against the criticism that will cancel out the positive. Instead, focus on what the child is doing well and decide when and how it would be best to address the negative.

1. **Always start with encouragement, pointing out what others did well.** Avoid the words *right* and *wrong*. Use words like *effective*, *less effective*, *helpful*, and *unhelpful*. Describe the possible outcome of making the mistake again, so they can use the information later.
2. **Allow children to experience their pleasure and satisfaction.**
3. **Decide how important it is to point out the negative now.**
 - a. If they know how to do the task but didn't do it well, notice their efforts and any progress they made. Reassure them that they'll continue improving with practice.
 - b. If they don't know how to do the task well or lack information, wait to teach another time (if you can). Don't cancel the positive effort and feeling of encouragement by adding criticism. Later, use the "teaching skills" tool from the Independence Toolset (Chapter 6), which builds encouragement into the teaching process.
 - c. Ask children how they feel about their work. If *they* are dissatisfied, ask them if there's anything they would do differently or to improve. If they have no ideas, ask if they want suggestions. If they say "no," let them learn on their own. Show faith in their ability to figure out a way to do their best.

A Personal Story. *I took my kids to the pool on the last day of summer. There was only one family there. The father repeatedly told his children how to spend their time, instead of allowing them to freely enjoy the last few minutes of summer. Every time his son jumped off the board, the father commented on how he could have improved his technique. He was impressed with his own knowledge about swimming and diving. The boy said he was going to do a “half gainer.” (I don’t even know how to spell it, let alone do it!) Instead, he did a cannonball. His father criticized his choice, “That wasn’t a half gainer!” The boy, obviously discouraged and tired of the constant pressure and corrections just said, “Well, I changed my mind.” He ignored his father’s next few comments. The father explained the technical features of half gainers to his wife and anyone else who was willing to listen. I’m sure this father was trying to help, but the boy obviously wanted to play without the diving lesson.*



Describe, Don’t Judge or Label ☆☆☆☆

It is a common misconception that people like praise. If we look at how we react to compliments, we’ll see that we often feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. Why do we make excuses or deny compliments such as “You’re hair always looks so perfect” or “You’re such a good singer”? We feel good, but we also doubt their judgment. We might say, “Well, I wouldn’t say it’s *perfect*” or “*Good singer?*” Praise often sounds insincere.

Sometimes our discomfort comes from feeling pressured to perform well the next time, since someone is judging us. Compliments like “You’re such a good cook, you should open a gourmet restaurant” might leave us focusing on our weakness (which is really our human nature). “Great! Now every meal has to be a gourmet one! I was planning beans and franks tomorrow night!”

What all these compliments have in common are their judgmental words: *best*, *good*, *perfect*, or labels like *gourmet*. These words add pressure and make people (children included) think others have unrealistic expectations of them. People who give compliments usually don’t mean to pressure or judge. They are trying to make the person feel good. Nevertheless, the way we word a compliment or encouragement greatly influences how others receive it. Here are some examples of common statements of praise and the resulting self-talk:

COMPLIMENT

“You’re such a good boy!”

“You did a good job.”

“You got an ‘A’! You’re such a good student.”

SELF-TALK

“Am I really good?” “Do I have to be good all the time?” “What if I’m not good? Will you still love me?”

“You might think it’s a good job. I know I didn’t do this . . . and this . . .” “I wonder what I did that was good so I can do it again.”

“What would you have said if I didn’t get an ‘A’?”
“Am I only a good student or person if I get good grades?”

To use the language of encouragement, remember one word—*DESCRIBE*.

Describe children’s feelings, efforts, progress or improvements, skills or qualities shown, the value of the act, or how it was helpful.

When we use descriptive words, there’s no question about our sincerity. It’s factual, so there’s nothing to dispute. It doesn’t add unrealistic pressure because we aren’t judging or labeling. As a result, people are more likely to take the comment in a positive way, feeling good about themselves and their efforts. Using this skill, let’s look at three praise statements, the child’s self-talk, an encouraging alternative, and the likely result for the child.

1. *Praise*: “You’re such a big boy! You can go potty all by yourself!”
Child’s self-talk: “Gee, I don’t know if I can always be a ‘big boy.’ Sometimes I like to keep playing without stopping to do this potty thing!”
Encouragement: “Hey! You made it to the potty, got your pants down by yourself, and remembered to flush the toilet! I bet it feels good to be able to go potty all by yourself!”
Child’s self-talk: “I really did do a lot this time! I’m getting better at this potty thing!”
2. *Praise*: “You did a good job on your project.”
Child’s self-talk: “Well, I won’t know that until I get a grade.”
Encouragement: “Gee! I can tell you spent a lot of time on your project! The writing is neat and easy to read and the color codes on your map make it easy to follow.”
Child’s self-talk: “Yeah, I did a pretty good job on that project! I’m glad I decided to use color. I’ll have to remember that next time.”
3. *Praise*: “That was a great game even though your team lost. You played really good today:”
Child’s self-talk: “Right, you think it was great. It wasn’t a great game—we lost! You must not have been watching or you would have seen me miss that goal in the second quarter.”
Encouragement: “Boy, you really played your heart out, didn’t you? You came so close to getting that goal in the second quarter and really poured it on at the end! I can tell you’re disappointed the team lost, but I could really see how much you’ve all improved! You’re passing the ball more, taking the ball further up the field, and working together as a team.”
Child’s self-talk: “I can’t believe I missed that goal, but I did do my best. I didn’t notice before, but we were passing more. We are improving! If we keep it up, maybe we’ll do better next time.”

If you doubt that people make these self-talk comments, pay attention to *your* self-talk the next time you receive praise and encouragement. When we give others a compliment and they argue or deny it, chances are we used unhelpful praise. If we use descriptive encouragement and they disagree, don’t argue, just say, “Well that’s how I saw it. You don’t have to agree.”

A Personal Story. When Amber was about 4, she showed me an art project she had just finished. When I saw it, I said, “Wow! Look at that! You found the construction paper on your own, cut all those triangles out by yourself, and glued them in that neat shape! Did you have fun?” She replied, enthusiastically, “Yeah! I’m going to make another one!” As she skipped down the stairs I could hear her singing a song to herself: “I’m a good artist. I’m a good artist.” I was so pleased she was telling this to herself, instead of needing me to tell her.

Encouragement usually takes more effort and more words. We have to be observant and sincere. It’s a lot harder than tossing out halfhearted one-word judgments. Unlike other wordy statements, such as criticism and lectures, others don’t grow tired of hearing positive comments that don’t add pressure. They keep listening.

EXPRESS APPRECIATION

Always say, “Thank you.” Even if people are just doing their job or are expected to do something anyway, don’t take their cooperation or helpfulness for granted.

- ▶ “I bet Brian had fun playing with you. You gave him lots of turns playing with your toys.”
- ▶ “Thanks for playing quietly while I took a nap. I feel more rested and happy.”
- ▶ “Thanks for helping with the dishes. I know it’s not your favorite thing to do. I don’t like to do it either. It really helps us finish quickly so we have more time to do what we really want to do.”

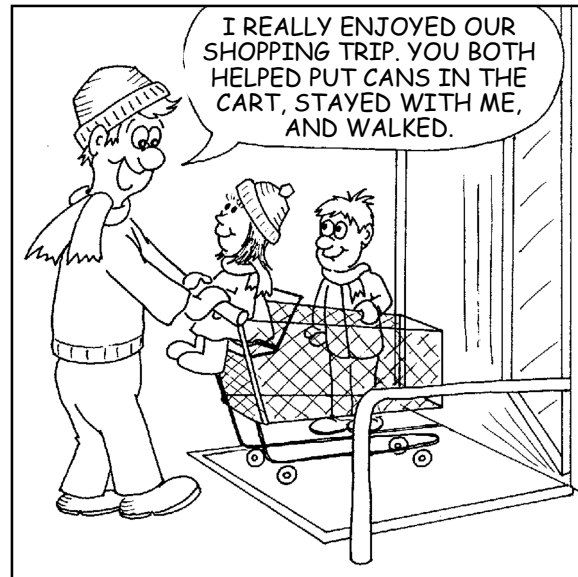
NAME THE QUALITY¹

At the end of a descriptive encouragement statement, we can add one or two words that sum up the *quality* it took to accomplish that act.

- ▶ “What a day! We’ve been on the road for hours! You kept yourself busy with puzzles, cards, and coloring. What a trooper!”
- ▶ “When Tony was here you let him play with your toys even though he doesn’t know how to share. You taught him how to ride your little bike. And you were gentle with him, even when he pulled your hair. Now that’s *tolerant!*”
- ▶ “That little girl didn’t seem to know anyone. I bet it made her feel really good when you asked her to play on the seesaw. That’s what being *friendly* is all about!”

Remember, we aren’t *judging* the behavior, *presuring*, or *labeling* the child; we are *describing* a skill, value, or quality the behavior showed.

Notice and *describe* positive behavior.



RELEASE CHILDREN FROM ROLES AND LABELS

Labeling children is common. Because children act a certain way, we label them as though they *are* the behavior. Labels, whether positive or negative, are limiting and discouraging. Labels influence how others think about children and, therefore, how they treat them.

When children hear a negative label, they see the label as their identity or the role they *should* play. People often recognize only behaviors that fit the label. “See, there you go again. You’re so mean.” Since everyone expects them to act this way, what motivation do they have to change or improve? Even normal behaviors can be turned into negative labels, such as “the terrible two’s,” “rebellious teen,” or “shy.” When such normal behaviors get negative labels, children think there is something wrong with them. Discouraged, they give up and live *down* to the label.

But let’s not ignore positive labels, such as *bright*, *athletic*, *angel*, or *big girl*. Any label, even a positive one, limits a child. The *bright* child be devastated by an average grade. *Athletes* might hesitate to pursue academics or music or feel pressured to be good in all sports. An *angel* might fear making mistakes, having a bad day, or expressing natural, negative feelings. A *big girl* probably feels pressure to always act grown up and guilty when she acts like a baby, which is normal at times. (“If she feels guilty then she’ll change her behavior,” you say? Yes, guilt can change behavior, but there are effective ways to change behavior without unhealthy guilt. We learn effective alternatives in Chapter 5, “Cooperation Toolset,” and the definition of unhealthy guilt in Chapter 10, “Clear Communication Toolset.”)

Labels are something we carry throughout life. When we believe a label, we *become* the label. We feel pressure to live up or down to the expectation, which limits our potential to improve or be humanly imperfect. When we get to this section in my parenting classes, we discuss our experience as a sibling or only child and the roles or labels we accepted. While some of us overcome these labels once we leave home, the label often reappears every time we are around our family. Parents have said, “I’m 50 years old and everyone still calls me ‘the baby.’” “My brother was always Mom’s favorite. They always show pictures of his kids and brag about his wonderful career. Our kids hardly even get a holiday greeting, let alone any attention when they come to visit. I feel like a constant disappointment to them, no matter how successful I am.”

A Graduate's Story. *"I was talking to my sister about the sibling class I was taking. I told her that I realized how much my upbringing affected my self-esteem. I had always scored well on intellectual tests, but was never able to succeed academically. I told her how much I admired her for finishing college. She told me that she had always admired my popularity. Then she told me something I hadn't remembered. She said our mother used to tell us that I was the "pretty" one and she was the "smart" one. Suddenly, it was clear to me. We each felt it was our "role" to be pretty or smart. We were expected to fit those roles, even if we had the potential to be different.*

"Okay," we might say, "I guess I've been guilty of occasionally labelling my children." Maybe our children have put themselves in roles or perhaps others (peers or teachers) have. What can we do to help our children become more than their role—to become whole again?²

- **Point out times when people behave differently from their role or label.** Instead of saying "For once you weren't bossy," describe what the child did, "I noticed the way you let Brad pick the game he wanted to play."
- **Create situations that can show children their full potential.** Say "Sure, you can walk on the curb," instead of "No, you're such a klutz, you'll probably fall." Instead of rolling our eyes as we watch her stumble and fall while playing hopscotch, say "I was watching you play hopscotch! How do you play? . . . It's hard to hop on one foot like that, huh?"
- **Speak positively about them to others.** Many parents talk about their children as though they weren't there. If children hear what we say to others, it makes more of an impact because they think they weren't supposed to hear it. Make an extra effort to tell a positive story to others about times when they behaved differently from their label. When Grandma calls, skip the story of Mark getting sent to the principal's office—again. Be sure to tell her, though, about something positive Mark did that week (even if it's the only time you can remember). We might tell others about the problems we have, but *not* when our children can hear. Also, be careful only to share this information with people who will treat the child with unconditional love and not judge or criticize. We don't want to reinforce labels others have for our children.
- **Restate the labels/roles you hear others use.** Other children and adults may use labels that limit our children. Or our children might put themselves in roles or label themselves. We can respond in ways that put the quality in a positive context. For example, when a lady at the store says, "My, isn't she shy," we can respond, "Sue speaks up when she feels comfortable talking."
- **Model the behavior you want to see.** If a child is a "smart mouth," be sure to speak in respectful ways, even when angry. If children lie, share your feelings the next time you are tempted to lie but choose not to.
- **Remind children of times they didn't behave according to their role.** If children have a hard time resolving conflicts without aggression, remind them of a time when it took a lot of effort, but they worked things out. Be careful not to word this like a guilt trip: "Why did you hit him? You know better than that! Can't you be civil?" Instead, we can reassure them when they're getting aggressive: "Hey! I know you're really angry with John. So angry you feel like punching him! It's hard, but I've seen you control your anger before. When Tom took your toy and broke it you were so angry! But you didn't deck him. You left before you did something you would regret. What can you do now?" We can physically direct the children while we speak, not just stand there commenting while they pound each other. (For more ideas about "bullies and victims," see the "Common Sibling Issues" section of Chapter 8, "Problem-Solving Toolset.")
- **Watch your thoughts.** Even if parents never use labels and roles in their speech, their thoughts can still affect their children. Words, looks, attitudes, and tone of voice can express parents' expectations and beliefs. The first step in changing children's roles is to change our thoughts. Believe children can be different, whole, and can reach their potential. Look for the positive qualities a

negative label can have. Use positive words when talking to children or about them. We will be more encouraging, our children will feel less discouraged, and will start displaying the positive qualities more often. Here is a list of negative labels and their positive qualities:

LABEL	POSITIVE QUALITY
Bossy	Knows what he or she wants, has leadership potential
Loud	Enthusiastic, outspoken
Messy	Carefree, busy, creative
Picky	Knows own likes and dislikes, has specific tastes
“Into everything”	Curious, eager to learn
Spacey	Internal, imaginative
Stubborn	Committed, opinionated, knows what he or she wants, sticks to it
Wild	Energetic, enthusiastic, vivacious

When we release children from roles, we help them see their full potential and teach them skills that help them feel whole and valuable.

Sticks and stones may break our bones and names really *can* hurt us. Our words can have a powerful effect on another person's life.



Stress Personal Achievement, Not Competition

Praise and ego-esteem are based on unhealthy competition—comparing oneself to others and trying to be better than them. When we compare ourselves to others, someone will always be better and someone will always be worse. Encouragement focuses on doing one's best, even if that best effort isn't perfect or even better than another's efforts. There are two ways parents can be more encouraging: (1) avoiding comparisons and (2) promoting only healthy competition.

AVOID COMPARISONS

Parents often praise children by comparing them to another child. Negative comparisons can make children feel inferior and can discourage them. For example, “You should save your money the way Jack does. He saved enough to buy a video game.” This child might now believe he is a poor saver and probably *always* will be. He may resent his brother for outdoing him and for having a prized toy he doesn't have. Even if the brother did not contribute to this exchange, it still increases the competition and rivalry between them.

Positive comparisons can also be problematic. “It sure is nice to have at least one neat kid. Your sister is such a slob,” can leave the praised child with one of several unhelpful feelings. She could feel sorry for her sister or feel better than her sister in a conceited way. Or she could feel pressure to always be better than her sister. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, in their book *Siblings Without Rivalry*, offer the following rule of thumb:

Whatever you want to tell this child can be said directly, without any reference to another child. The key word is *describe*.

Encourage the child's effort instead of comparing the child or the effort to another. Using descriptive encouragement in the above situations, we might say the following:

- ▶ “If you’d like a video game, you can save some of your money.”
- ▶ “Your room looks so neat. Not only did you pick up all the dirty clothes, but you even dusted and organized your shelves. I bet it feels good to spend time in there.”

Even when parents don’t compare them, children may compare themselves as they compete for a place in the family or peer group. If one child is good in athletics, another child might believe that role is taken and pursue another talent. If one child is better than another in athletics, music, dance, or academics, it doesn’t mean another child shouldn’t pursue that interest. When children compare themselves, respond without validating the comparison:

Child: “Susan’s such a good violin player. I’ll never be as good as she is.”

Parent: “How Susan plays has nothing to do with whether you should play or not. If you want to keep playing the violin, do it! You seem to enjoy it and you’ve improved a lot this year . . . I remember when you first tried that hard sonata. Last night when I heard you playing it, I actually stopped drying the dishes and just listened. It sounded so beautiful.”

Child: “My kite didn’t break because I took care of mine. Jimmy’s is broken already!”

Parent: “Jimmy knows how to take care of his things, too. Jimmy, you must be disappointed your kite broke. What happened? . . . Oh . . . I bet you’ll avoid those trees next time, huh?”

It is natural to notice differences between children. One child’s strength can be another’s weakness. Instead of trying to make children the *same* as each other or into what *we* consider ideal children, we can appreciate their differences.

Families who focus on competition actually *increase* the differences and resentment among family members. Families who value individuality and model cooperation have children who are more confident and cooperative with each other.

PROMOTE ONLY HEALTHY COMPETITION

Comparisons are never helpful; competition, when used in healthy ways, can be. Many people think the only way to prove they are *good* is to compete and win. In the workplace, some adults compete with cutthroat tactics. At home, parents encourage their children to race, to motivate them into action. “The first one to _____ wins!” Of course, the youngest or weakest children usually lose, which only discourages them more. Racing differs from seeing if we can do something fast with no winners. “Let’s sing the clean-up song and see how many toys we can pick up before we’re done.” If children insist on racing, encourage them to level the playing field by giving less-experienced children a head start or encouraging them to do their best without racing.

A Personal Story. Chris, being the fast runner that he is, likes to race. He likes to challenge himself and have some reference for how fast he ran. When we take walks, he’ll say, “I’m going to run around the block. I’ll see if I can get back to you by the time you get to the corner.”

Amber is four years younger and dislikes racing. But she has a healthy, noncompetitive, self-motivated attitude and is usually willing to try new things. I’ve handled Chris’ racing challenges several ways. I have always focused on the process of an activity, rather than the outcome. If Chris wants to race, I sometimes say, “A race takes two people. Amber, do you want to race?” If she declines, I suggest Chris just run by himself. Other times, I’ll say, “If you want to run, Amber, go ahead. You don’t have to race, just have fun.”

When Chris gloats or teases her for losing, I tell him I expect him to be a good sport and be respectful and encouraging to the other players. “If you want Amber to keep racing with you, give her some encouragement.” He usually describes her improvements and thanks her for racing.

Competition can be healthy or unhealthy. In unhealthy competition, the pressure to win is more important than the fun of playing or the value of the skills we learn in the process. The motivation to win reinforces the desire to be the *best* or *better than* others. It is discouraging to lose, because winning is the goal. Consequently, unhealthy competition promotes selfishness and poor sportsmanship.

A Personal Comment. *A local newspaper reporter did a feature story about select sports teams and how some emphasize winning at the cost of equal participation.³ I was shocked at some of the comments made by coaches and the clubs' official rules. For example, a third-grade team's coach said, "We don't want to lose a ball game because we played kids equally. It's sort of like a business: I'm trying to put the best product on the floor." He views these eight- and nine-year-old children as products! The official statement of that ball club says, "While the commitment of [the club] is to develop talent, the parents and players must realize that [the club] will play to win . . . there is no guarantee regarding playing time." Parents enroll their children, who are obviously good enough to make the team, so the children can improve their skills. Instead, some children warm the bench, which doesn't improve their skills at all! The coach's response to this comment was, "At some point in time, kids have to understand they're not good enough." Can you imagine how many children would give up a sport before their prime after hearing this! When the reporter interviewed a dozen children, they seemed to have their priorities much more in line than the adults. They all said they favored playing over winning. One girl said, "If I had my choice of playing five games or winning one, I'd rather play five. I think it's more fun to play than it is to win." It makes me wonder, "Who are these kids playing for—their coaches' reputation and prestige (or maybe their parents') or to build skills, self-confidence, and a healthy attitude about competition?"*

Healthy competition focuses on doing one's best. We only need to compete with ourselves. Those who give a strong effort and strive to improve themselves will often advance without taking someone else down in the process. If learning or improving is the goal, we always reach it. If we happen to win, it's icing on the cake. Healthy competition in work or team sports promotes teamwork, working together for a common goal—to participate and do one's best. Team members learn to support each other, work together, and do one's individual best to help the team.

Unhealthy competition. Winning, being the best, or being better than others is more important than having fun or learning skills. It adds pressure.

Healthy competition. Doing one's best, having fun, and learning skills in the process.

In their enthusiasm, some parents model poor sportsmanship when they stand on the sidelines yelling insults at referees who penalize their children. These parents teach their children to make excuses or to find someone to blame for their mistakes. Parents who yell negative advice such as "Come on! Wake up!" or "It's about time" are a pain in the neck to their children and an irritation to other parents who want to be encouraging.

A Personal Story. *At one of Chris' soccer games, a father kept yelling criticisms at his son, thinking he would motivate the boy. His father's nitpicking continually distracted the boy and irritated the other parents. Finally, in the middle of a play, the boy stopped and yelled, "Just leave me alone!" The father probably thought his son was "talking back," but many of the other parents silently appreciated **someone** speaking up to the father.*

If we must yell during a game, let's make it encouraging: "Yes!" "Way to go!" "That's it!" "Nice kick!" "Keep it up!" If we see something that needs improvement and just can't keep quiet, tell children what to do in a positive way: "Spread out!" "Work together!" "Center it!" "Run!" After an event, let's restrict our comments to descriptions of how the child or team did well, made an effort, or improved. Don't focus on the score or outcome. If children bring this up, acknowledge their positive or negative feelings and include some comment about effort or improvement.

A Personal Story. Sometimes it is *really* hard to find something positive to say in our comments. Amber only played soccer for one season. It was obvious, with each game, that this was probably not her cup of tea. She was clueless about the purpose of the game and her foot never touched the ball through the first half of the season.

Over time, she improved, but very little. She ran a little faster each game. She still planted herself in her defensive position and didn't move—but she did stick her foot out, now and then, when the ball came near. It was painful to watch these games from the sidelines. My husband, my parents, and I wanted so much to cheer her on, but struggled to find anything positive to say. We were thrilled if she did something we could encourage. After each game, I tried to offer several positive (but honest) descriptive comments. My father still chuckles when he reminds me of my comments after one game. I enthusiastically said, “Your foot touched the ball three times today! You almost caught up with the pack! And I saw how well you defended your spot. No one was going to get the ball into your space!”



Be Gentle with Mistakes

The biggest difference between perfectionists and healthy achievers is the way they view and handle mistakes. Perfectionists are rarely satisfied because their best is never perfect. Most had perfectionist parents, who wanted to be perfect parents with perfect children. Now as adults, these parents may not realize how their comments reinforce a child's insecurities or add pressure. When they say things like “You could do better if . . .” or “I know you can do it,” their children believe that they are never good enough, no matter how hard they try.

A Graduate's Story. My mother would always remake my bed and rehang my clothes after I left for school. I could never figure out what was wrong with it. To me, my bed looked like an army bunk, tight enough to bounce a coin. I tried doing it the way she said, but despite my efforts, my mother was never satisfied. I finally figured, “What's the point, it's never good enough anyway,” and stopped trying. To this day, I hate to make beds and have to force myself to hang up clothes.

One of the scariest trends facing parents today is the frightening number of teen suicides. Teens who seem to have it all are literally killing themselves because they can never reach unrealistic goals (their parents', society's, and their own). Teens see how specialized jobs have become. They think they must quickly find their niche—one way they can be perfect. If they have a failed love affair, they wallow in despair. But who has found the perfect love or the perfect niche in their teens? Teens who are naturally smart and don't have to work hard to succeed can actually be a high suicide risk. Because they rarely fail, they might fall apart when they make mistakes.

Children who have to work hard for their achievements, making mistakes and occasionally failing along the way, often handle disappointment better. Their mistakes and struggles strengthen their character. They are healthy achievers: good self-starters, ambitious, courageous, and willing to take risks. They build on their strengths and work to improve their weaknesses. They try to do their best and strive for excellence, but don't expect perfection. If their best only warrants a “C” grade, they might be disappointed, but they know they did their best and learn ways to improve the next time.

So what can we do as parents to avoid perfectionism or help a child who is too critical?

LET CHILDREN MAKE MISTAKES AND LEARN FROM THEM

I often hear teens complain, “I want to make my own decisions and learn from my own mistakes. My parents are always telling me about what *they* learned, instead of letting me learn lessons myself.” A teen's desire for independence is a healthy sign of maturity and confidence—“I can do it myself.” When our babies wanted to walk, did we stop them? We couldn't protect them from every fall and

thank goodness we didn't! (We further discuss parents' legitimate concerns about the dangerous risks that come with teenage independence in Chapter 6, "Independence Toolset.")

We need to be careful that we don't protect our children from non-dangerous mistakes or go around behind them correcting what they've done. It is discouraging when others point out and correct mistakes. If we are always there to rescue our children, they will never learn to stand on their own. Mistakes show us what *not* to do in the future, which is often a valuable lesson.

When children make a mistake, don't belittle their emotions, "It's no big deal. You'll get over it." Recognize what they might be feeling, "It can be frustrating to work on a project so long and not have it turn out like you hoped." Help them view the mistake as an important part of the learning process. Don't lecture or point everything out for them. Instead, ask questions to help them see what they learned. "What happened? Do you have any idea why?" "How do you feel about it?" "What did you learn?" Reassure them, "Hey, we still love you—a lot."

Some mistakes are unavoidable. Correcting and learning from our mistakes is most important. In truth, there are no mistakes—*everything* is a lesson.

HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP COURAGE

In the book *Active Parenting*, author Michael Popkin defines courage as "the willingness to take a *known risk* for a *known purpose*." The known purpose is what we hope to accomplish. The known risk is the worst that could happen. Often, the risk is simply to try, possibly fail, but learn some valuable skills in the process. Courage is different from impulsiveness or disregard for the risks; courage is not blind. The key element of courage is knowing that the purpose *is* worth the risk. Truly courageous people are not without fear; they just don't let the fear prevent them from taking educated, planned risks. Courageous people ask themselves, "If I fail, what will I have accomplished in trying?" Even if they don't get the expected results, they realize they have gained knowledge and have stretched themselves further than they thought they could.

When I think of someone who was not afraid of mistakes and knew how to learn from them, I think of Thomas Edison. He never viewed his failures as mistakes, because they always taught him some piece of information that was helpful later. Had he not been willing to take risks, we would be without many modern inventions.

***A Personal Experience.** At a conference I attended, H. Stephen Glenn, author of *Developing Capable People*, shared a story about Thomas Edison and the risks of letting mistakes affect another person's self-esteem. The night before Edison was to present his new invention, the electric light bulb, to the press and public, his assistant accidentally broke the only working bulb. They had spent all day making this bulb and stayed up all night remaking a new one. The next day, he handed the bulb to his assistant for safe keeping. "Why did you let him hold it?", others asked him, "Weren't you afraid he'd break it again?" Edison responded, "There was more at stake than a light bulb; affirmation and trust are more important. After what he did, who could I trust more to hold on tight?"*

IS PRAISE EVER OKAY?

Okay, by now your healthy paranoia is in full bloom. You are probably saying, "I've been praising my children their whole lives! I had no idea that my efforts to make them feel better could be making them feel bad!" Whoa! Take it easy. First, if the worst thing you ever do in parenting is to praise rather than

encourage, you still get a gold star. Remember, we are looking at *more effective* and *less effective* methods, not *right* and *wrong*. Praise isn't bad, it's just less effective at building self-esteem than descriptive encouragement and has potential negative side effects.

Knowing the pitfalls of praise, there will still be times when praise is natural and necessary. Praise *can* be encouraging, depending on the following factors:⁴

- We are accepting of our children, despite their behavior.
- We can be proud of our children just because of who they are.
- Our genuine intent is to encourage rather than control.
- Children are not expecting or demanding praise to get attention.
- Children are not dependent on other's opinions for their self-worth.

Use praise with encouragement, not as a tool by itself. If you're feeling genuinely enthusiastic and find yourself exclaiming "Good!" don't feel guilty. Just follow it up with an encouraging, descriptive statement so the child knows *why* it was good.

To tell whether our statements are praise or encouragement, ask:

- Am I inspiring self-evaluation or dependency on others' opinions?
- Am I being respectful or patronizing?
- Can I see their point of view or only my own?
- Would I make this comment to a friend?

ENCOURAGE YOURSELF

Raising your self-esteem as a parent strengthens the self-esteem of the entire family. You are worthwhile because you are you. You do not have to earn your worth by being an effective parent.

Use Positive Self-Talk

It's easy to criticize ourselves. Self-encouragement takes much more effort, at least at first. We can consciously *choose* what we tell ourselves about events and our abilities. The self-esteem and serenity we gain make it worth the effort.

Pay attention to the dialogue that goes on in your head. Many negative thoughts are leftover baggage from childhood. "You shouldn't do that . . ." "That was somehow my fault." If you had an unhappy childhood, it's not too late to give yourself what you need. Encourage yourself now, the way you wish your parents had.

Give yourself credit for what you are doing well. List, on paper, what you do well and your strengths as a person and parent. If you notice a negative thought about your abilities, decide if it is accurate. "I am a bad parent" is not accurate. You are judging, criticizing, and labeling yourself. Ask yourself, "What, specifically, do I think is so bad?" As you list your weaknesses, view them as areas to work on. Take each negative quality and create a positive statement out of it.

When writing positive affirmations, use words that are constructive and reassuring, as though you already have the quality.

- Instead of saying, "I will try . . ." say "I will . . ."
- Instead of "I will stop (old action)" say "I will (new action)."
- Instead of "I wish I could be . . ." say "I am . . ."
- Avoid words that compare. Instead of "I will _____ more than _____," say "I will _____."

Repeat the statements out loud throughout the day. Say them to yourself in the shower, while driving or jogging, when relaxing, or when looking in the mirror in the morning. By telling yourself you have positive qualities, you begin to believe in yourself. What you believe, you will see. The truth here is that you *do* have all the positive qualities you want to have. You just have to be willing to believe you are worthy of your own love. Program your thoughts and speech in the positive and the negative will begin to disappear.

Love Yourself Unconditionally

Value, accept, and appreciate yourself as you are, with all your imperfections. Parenting is a challenging task; both you and your children will make mistakes. When you do something you wish you hadn't, be kind to yourself. Remember, what's important is that you learn something from the mistake and make amends if you've hurt someone. View your mistakes with a sense of humor. Laugh at yourself in a friendly, loving way. (Reread the Declaration of Imperfection in Chapter 1, "Touring The Parent's Toolshop.")

Divorced parents can face difficult challenges to their self-esteem. When a relationship fails, the partners often feel like *they* are failures. Even if a separation or divorce is an improvement, family members can experience a temporary dip in their self-esteem. If either parent uses the children to hurt the other, it affects the self-esteem of both parents and children. Self-blame and blaming the other spouse create a negative and unhelpful attitude. Parenting after divorce is a time of healing and establishing new, revised family relationships.

Children have a higher need for security and affirmation during and after divorce. Some children wrongfully blame themselves for the divorce. Children are frightened to see the adults in their life acting like children—arguing, blaming, yelling, or being revengeful. Children can have temporary regressions in behavior or start behaving negatively. Since misbehavior is the result of discouragement, encouragement at these times is critical.

You can regain or improve the self-esteem your family had before the divorce. Focus on strengths, encourage yourself, use positive self-talk, and visualize yourself meeting your goals. Offer your children encouragement and reassurance. You can live and thrive after divorce. You have a choice, however, as to the quality of that life. Whatever the financial or material resources you have, your inner resources are what matter most to your recovery.

IMPORTANT POINTS ABOUT ENCOURAGEMENT

- **Encouragement is the one tool that most directly builds self-esteem.** Several other toolsets build self-esteem in indirect ways. The Independence Toolset teaches children skills, helping them feel more capable and confident to try new things. The Cooperation Toolset prevents power struggles, which are discouraging to parents and children and can lead to misbehavior. The F-A-X Listening Toolset helps us acknowledge children's feelings, giving them the courage to face and overcome their problems. While the specific toolset we choose will differ according to the situation, follow the basic guidelines outlined in this chapter when using encouragement.

- **Descriptive encouragement is a powerful tool.** When we describe what our children do in an appreciative or enthusiastic way, they will often repeat the behavior. So be careful what you encourage. If your child is playing with a loud, obnoxious toy, and you want him or her to stop, don't say, "Boy! You look like you're having fun!" The child is sure to show you just how much fun by making noise for another hour!
- **Don't just use encouragement *on* your children, *teach them* how to use the skills, too.** Show them how to give compliments that increase self-esteem rather than ego-esteem. Restate their comparisons to other children. Give them positive statements to replace negative self-talk. Help them turn their mistakes into important learning experiences they can feel good about.

The best way to quickly remember the basics of building self-esteem and using descriptive encouragement is D.I.P.:

Describe what the person did well or any effort/improvement, focus on
Internal qualities or what the person thinks/feels, and have a
Positive focus on what is *right*.

Give each person you know "A D.I.P. a day" and see how quickly their self-esteem *and* *behavior* improves!

SUMMARY SHEET SELF-ESTEEM TOOLSET

SELF-ESTEEM is how we feel about our inside qualities.

SELF-IMAGE is how we think we appear to others on the outside.

EGO-ESTEEM is thinking we are (or are trying to be) better than others.

PRAISE uses judging labels that focus on pleasing others.

ENCOURAGEMENT uses descriptive words that foster internal motivation.

SHOW UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

- Give encouragement when children aren't expecting or demanding it.
- Don't use love as a conditional reward.
- Describe each child's special qualities.
- Give according to individual needs, not equally.
- Spend one-on-one time with each child; have fun!

FOCUS ON SELF-MOTIVATION ☆☆☆☆

- Show trust in children's judgement. Ask children their opinions.
- Help children trust their inner voice and not rely on others' opinions.
- Focus on children's feelings about their accomplishments.

SEE THE POSITIVE ☆☆☆☆

- Focus on what's right. Point out positive behavior and qualities.
- Give credit for any effort children make.
- Describe how children's efforts help themselves or others.

POINT OUT ANY IMPROVEMENTS CHILDREN MAKE

- Avoid "constructive criticism" and reminding children of past mistakes.

DESCRIBE, DON'T JUDGE ☆☆☆☆

- Avoid words like "good." Instead, describe what makes it "good."
- Express appreciation.
- Name the quality they showed or used.
- Free children from roles and labels, both positive and negative.

AVOID COMPARISONS

- Describe what that person did, without any reference to others.
- Discourage unhealthy competition. Focus on doing one's best.

BE GENTLE WITH MISTAKES ☆☆☆☆

- Focus on the lesson.
- Have realistic expectations. Encourage children to do their best.

Quick Reminder:

Give children a D.I.P. a day! (Describe, focus on Internal and Positive)

THE LANGUAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

I love you just because you're you.	You showed good judgment by. . .	Look at that!
You are special, because . . . (list qualities).	I can see you did (describe what's "right").	I know it's not your favorite thing to do. Thanks for doing it anyway.
Your needs are important.	Thanks for helping with . . .	You sure (describe).
I like spending time with you.	Thanks, that helped a lot.	You ___ and ___ That's what I call ___.
Let's do something together, just you and me. Any ideas?	It was thoughtful of you to . . .	I bet it made (person) feel (feeling) when you (describe).
What do you think?	Thanks, I really appreciate ___ because it . . .	Did it feel good to ___?
You have a real talent/skill for . . .	I need your help with . . .	I noticed the way you . . .
Can you help the family by . . .?	I admire your . . .	I really appreciate the way you . . .
I trust your opinion.	That's it! You (describe)	Remember when you . . .
I believe in you.	Try again.	Go ahead! Try!
It's okay to feel that way.	I can tell you have improved (describe).	What (person) does has nothing to do with you. If you want to ___, do it!
Even if I'm upset about something you did, I still love you.	You might not feel ___, but look how well you . . .	Not only did you ___, but you even ___.
I know you did the best you could.	You really worked hard on that.	Just do your best.
I can tell you're pleased with it.	Your hard work really paid off.	Way to go!
Tell me what you like about it.	You tried and tried and didn't give up.	That's it!
You've really come a long way!	You'll get it with practice.	Keep it up!
I bet it feels good to be able to. . .	How do you feel?	Work together!
You can be proud of yourself . . .	I have faith in you.	Even if it isn't perfect, that's okay. You did your best.
I trust your judgment.	You spent a lot of time on . . .	I know you'll learn something from it.
I know you'll work it out.	The way you ___ is especially ___.	What happened?
You have a good head on your shoulders.	Hey! You made it!	Do you know why?
	You came so close!	What did you learn?
	I could really see how much you improved. (Describe how.)	Is there anything you might do differently?

PRACTICE EXERCISES

Write an encouraging response to these statements or select the multiple-choice answer you think is most encouraging. There's not one right answer to most, but there are some clues to help you choose certain helpful tools you just learned. It's still up to you to plan the actual words to use. (Possible answers are at the end of the chapter, but give your answers first, before looking at them.)

1. Child: "Who do you love more? Me or Jessica?"
2. Child: "He got more than me!"
3. Your child has been in her room for an hour and says she's finished cleaning her room. When you look, it's still cluttered and disorganized.
(Finish this sentence.) I see you've . . . (describe, list)
If you haven't taken time to teach what "clean" is or how to do it, what would you do?
If you *have* taught what "clean" is and how to do it, what would you say?
4. Your daughter was pulling weeds, but accidentally pulled up flowers. (Show understanding for her mistake and give information.)
5. Your preschool child got dressed by himself. His shoes are on the wrong feet and his shirt is on backwards. (Describe what's "right" and how this effort was an improvement.)
6. Your son finally said "Excuse me," instead of laughing, when he burped at the dinner table. What would you say?
7. Your daughter scored in the 99% range in math on a placement evaluation, but only got a B- on her report card. What do you say?
8. Your son cooked macaroni and cheese by himself. Thank him by describing the steps he took.
9. Your daughter is an accident-prone "klutz." Write statements to help free her from this label.
 - a. Ask her to do something that takes coordination.
 - b. Describe a time when she didn't fall.
 - c. Describe what she did well.
10. Your children are arguing in the back seat. As usual, it's the same one picking on his favorite victim, his older sister. Help free both of them from their roles.
 - a. Express confidence in the "bully's" ability to get along.
 - b. Encourage the "victim" to be assertive.
11. Name the quality, using the formula: "You (describe). That must have taken (quality)."
 - a. Your child returned your tools to the toolbox, for once.
 - b. Your daughter styled her hair in a fancy braid.
12. Your son and daughter are cleaning their rooms. Your son finishes first and did a good job. Your daughter is getting distracted and hasn't accomplished much. Say something to each, without comparing to the other.
 - a. What would you say to your son, who's done?
 - b. What would you say to your daughter, who's not done?
13. At a baseball game, your child is daydreaming in the outfield. If you shout something, what will you say?
14. Your child wants to run for class office. Encourage her without focusing on winning.

Activity for the Week

Use your family members' names and information to fill the blanks. Tell them these statements sometime this week.

"I like the way you _____ . Will you help us by _____?"

"Thanks for doing _____. It _____."
(describe how it helped you or the family)

Something _____ does well is _____.
(name) (describe)

Something _____ accomplished this week is _____.
(name) (describe)

Something _____ did that helped someone is _____.
(name) (describe)

Something _____ did that took courage is _____.
(name) (describe)

One way _____ has improved in _____ is _____.
(name) (skill) (describe)

A good habit _____ has is _____.
(name) (describe)

Something _____ did for me this week that I never thanked him/her for is _____.
(name) (describe)

Possible Answers

1. "I love you both in very special ways. You are special to me because . . . (describe qualities)."
2. "Would you like more? If you're still hungry when you finish that, you can have more."
3. "I see you put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket and your books on the shelf." If you haven't taught them what "clean" is, drop it, for now. Plan to teach your definition of "clean" another time. If you have taught them, ask "What else do you see that you might have forgotten?"
4. "I appreciate all the hard work you did here. I can see how you might mistake these for weeds, but they're flowers. Next time, you can tell the difference by looking at (show and describe)."
5. "Wow! You got dressed all by yourself! You got your head and arms in your shirt, pulled your pants up all the way, and even got your socks on! They can be pretty tricky!" Unless you are going someplace special, don't even comment on mistakes. Spend time later teaching skills. You could make a suggestion, like "Sometimes it helps if . . ." or ask a question that will help the child realize *on his own* that he made a mistake. For example, "How did you decide which foot to put your shoes on?"
6. "Thank you for saying, 'Excuse me'."
7. "Look at this 'A' you got in spelling! How do you feel about your grades? Are you satisfied with your math grade? Do you want to bring up the grade? How could you do that?"
8. "Thanks for fixing this! It will be so nice to be able to relax before dinner. You really did a lot, didn't you? You got out the right size pan, cooked the macaroni nice and tender, and the cheese is just the right consistency. Did you do anything special to make it so creamy?"

9. (These are just my ideas, did you come up with some?)
 - a. "Here, will you carry this for me?" (Select a non-breakable object for this.)
 - b. "Remember how you stepped off the escalator at the store the last time? We can count 1-2-3 again, if you like."
 - c. "Thanks for putting that bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. It's pretty heavy. You must have used those muscles of yours."
10. To the "bully": "I know you are can play quietly and respectfully. Why don't you suggest something you can do together, or maybe you'd rather sit in the other seat." To the "victim": "If you don't like what Tom is doing, say, 'Stop it!' You can speak up for yourself."
11. a. "You returned my tools! I'll appreciate being able to find them quickly. That was a conscientious thing to do!"
 - b. "Wow! Did you braid your hair all by yourself? That must have taken fancy finger work!"
12. To your son, who's finished cleaning, describe what you see, without comparing him to his sister. To your daughter, who's not done, describe what she has done so far and ask what she plans to work on next. Don't point out or remind her that her brother is already done or the quality of work he did.
13. "Go Mark!" "Eyes up, Bud"! "Here it comes!" "Get ready!" (Pick one. I bet you had some more!)
14. "What would you like to accomplish as class officer? What would your responsibilities entail? It takes courage to run for office. I admire your willingness to make an effort to take on a leadership role. Whether you win or lose, I'm sure you'll learn a lot from the experience."

WHAT'S NEXT?

Use descriptive encouragement in your daily interactions with children *and* adults. You can find many ways to build self-esteem in your children, other family members, co-workers, friends, and even strangers. When you notice the good in others and point it out to them, they blossom before your eyes. Feel free to work with these skills for a week before reading the next chapter.

Chapter 5, "Cooperation Toolset," is most parents' favorite chapter. In it we learn many four-star tools that can prevent the power struggles most parents face. Life is smoother when we work *with* our children as members of the family team. We reach win/win solutions by offering choices within the limits we set using positive words. Most parents see immediate results from these tools—their attitudes change and so does their children's behavior.

REFERENCES

1. *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Avon Books, 1982) p. 181–183.
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