

(An excerpt from Classrooms That Work: A Teacher's Guide to Discipline Without Stress)

The encouraging teacher

The essence of encouragement is to focus on a child's strengths, on what's "right" with the child, not on weaknesses, or what's "wrong." Even if you make a mistake in an encouraging classroom, you are encouraged to try again. Every effort is made to find something positive in the mistake itself. This gives courage to the child — the courage to take a chance and try something even if they don't know what the outcome will be. It gives them, in other words, the courage to fail.

If something is a bit of a reach for them and they fail, let them know it was a good effort and that you know they will eventually succeed. All the while, remind yourself that mistakes are part of life and that failure is not a catastrophe unless we make it so. The point to understand here is that it is important to work for improvement, rather than perfection. Try and set up expectations and goals the child can actually attain. Let your students know that his efforts are more important than the results and that it is more important to try than to succeed. After all, learning is often a process in which we fail at something but continue on until we get it right. Your job is to instill in your students the idea that it is okay to fail, that it is a part of learning. We often underestimate children. Showing that we have faith lets them know that we trust them and have confidence in them even when they are less than successful.

Encouraging statements

As with most things in life, it's the little things that have the most impact. This is doubly true when dealing with a discouraged student. In order to coax the child into believing she can do it, start by pointing out the little improvements in her work, even to the point of overemphasizing. In doing this it's very important to catch her at the moment of effort, and then to be very enthusiastic.

Use phrases like these to point out even minute attempts:

- "Boy, you're really keeping at it. You're not giving up."
- "You're determined."

Say to him: "You may feel that you can't do it, but I'm confident that you are very capable. That's because I've seen it in other things you have done." You then point out the other areas that he has triumphed in, especially if he had experienced some trouble at first.

Here are some more examples of encouraging statements that can be used in almost any circumstance. Notice that they can be used both when the child has done something wonderful and when they have made a mistake. Also keep in mind that in order for encouraging remarks to have a positive effect, you must let them know that you really do believe they can do it. Tone is also important. A preachy, patronizing tone will not work, even if the words are encouraging. These encouraging statements are good at stimulating effort, developing cooperation and showing appreciation for work done:

- “You really seem to enjoy doing that.”
- “It would be a great help to me (us) if you could do this particular job.”
- “You are really getting much better at doing that.”
- “Don’t give up. Keep trying.”
- “I’m sure you can figure out a solution to this problem.”
- “I like the way you handled that.”
- “I know you want us to think you can’t do that, but we think you can.”
- “If you need help, you know where to find me.”

Discouraging statements

Here are some examples of discouraging statements:

- “Don’t spill that.”
- “I think you could have done a better job of that.”
- “Your friend Jacob could have completed that.”
- “Oh no! You did it again.”
- “Here, let me do that for you.”
- “You’re too young to do that.”
- “Don’t get dirty.”
- "Don't be late."
- “You could do that if you weren’t so lazy.”
- “I thought I could trust you.”