

learning for life



by Robin Booth



NOURISHING SELF-ESTEEM

'...and actively searching out the language that nourishes self-esteem.'

I was standing in front of 50 teachers at a traditional school that my grandfather had gone to. In fact, so had my uncles, my cousins and my brother. The teachers were all looking at me expectantly as I recalled the words their School Principal had said to me the day before in preparation for this workshop, "I promised my teachers they were in for real treat with you. It's going to be great tomorrow!"

Well, that tomorrow was now today and I did not feel those words particularly supported me in achieving the goal that he was wanting his team to arrive at. In fact, it seemed to place a lot of stress on me to achieve and perform to his expectations. Somewhere deep inside I knew that his intention was to convey his praise and acknowledgement that my skills might bring to this workshop. But it was not what he was saying that was important, but what I was *understanding* while he was saying it.

This concept of 'praise' can be an ambiguous process. It can be an elusive phrase that may produce results that are contrary to our intentions. How can we align our words of praise so that the people receive them with the positivity that we intended?

One of the fantastic things about being teachers or parents, is that we are presented with limitless opportunities to refine our skills of positive encouragement that will bring us closer to those beaming smiles that show that our words have resonated with the children we are relating to.

"positive encouragement promotes self-motivation"

Traditional praise imposes value judgements. "What a good job you did" implies that the child has value if his work is good in your opinion. "I'm proud of you" tells the child that pleasing us is more important. Traditional praise is limiting because it focuses on the extrinsic: our good opinion or comparison with others in the class, a predetermined criteria.

On the other hand, positive encouragement promotes self-motivation, personal achievement and independent action.

Here are some suggestions that may support you in connecting to the heart of what it is your child is doing that will enable them to understand your positive intentions.

You walk into your son's room and see he has cleaned up his mess.

1. *Describe what you see.* "I see a clean floor, a smooth bed, and puzzles packed away."
2. *Describe what you feel.* "It's a pleasure to walk into this room."
3. *Sum up the child's praiseworthy behaviour with a word.* "You sorted out your puzzles."

Pencils and pens are put in separate boxes. That's what I call organisation!"

4. *Describe what it is you like as a means of guidance.* "I like the way you packed all the blocks away in that neat order. The small ones in that corner, the round ones over here."

5. *Responding in a more factual manner is also more meaningful than value judgements which may be interpreted as manipulative:*

"I like the way you said 'thank you' to me when I lent you my pencil," is more specific and tangible than "I like your manners."

"I noticed that you really thought long and hard before you answered that question," is more useful than "That was clever".

When a parent says, "I knew you could do it all along," she is giving credit to her own omniscience rather than to her child's achievements. It would be more helpful to the child to hear his accomplishments described. "You were persistent with that problem. Your determination paid off."

6. *Check to see what your ratio of criticism to positive acknowledgement is.*

The world tells us what is wrong with our children, loud and often. And we have so many opportunities to let our children know what is right about them. Appropriate encouragement should not be left to chance encounters or to strangers. It is the building block of self-esteem.

7. *Think of all the things you appreciate about your children.*

And ask yourself if they know this. Why not tell them? Maybe write a note that they can keep and read at their leisure.

8. *What is your favourite experience or memory you have had with your child?*

Do they know that? Wouldn't you like to know from your parents what their favourite memory of you is?

As parents and educators we both need to know the difference between words that demoralise and those that give courage, between the words that trigger confrontation and those that invite co-operation; between the words that make it impossible for the child to think or concentrate and the words that free the natural desire to learn. We have a right to be who we are and we help make one another who we are by how we treat each other.

