

FOUR COMMON WAYS PARENTS DISCOURAGE THEIR CHILDREN

Focusing on Mistakes

It is easy for us to look at a piece of homework and ignore the thoughtful ideas and amount of effort a child put into it. But we *do* notice the three misspelled words. Often the first thing we do is point out the errors. If we are not also careful to comment upon the things that were done well, then soon a child comes to think she does more wrong than right. Such discouragement leads to more mistakes, which produce more criticism from the parent and so on. Children need to be corrected when they make mistakes. Correction helps them know what to do differently next time. But they probably need to hear four to five times as much about what they do right to balance the effect our criticism may have on their courage and self-esteem.

Personality Attacks and Perfectionism

When we call our children names, such as “lazy,” “careless,” or “stupid,” we are attacking their self-esteem and courage at their core. Not to mention that such tactics usually backfire. After all, if you tell a child that he is lazy, then what should you expect in the future but lazy behavior? Instead focus your comments on the problem behavior. Don’t say “Why are you so lazy?”; say instead, “You haven’t done your homework.”

A subtle form of personality attack is perfectionism. This is the tendency always to require more from the child than she is giving. The message of perfectionism is that no matter how well you do, you should have done better. When children come to believe that they are never quite good enough, they lose motivation: “I never did it well enough anyway, so why try?” Even when these children seem to keep trying, they never feel secure in their achievements. They may get all A’s but rather than enjoying the accomplishment, they are already worrying about the next challenge to their perfection. Such perfectionist thinking has been linked to eating disorders and depression in adolescents.

Negative Expectations

In a classic psychology experiment, teachers were told that half the students in their classes had tested high on a measure predicting academic success, and the other half had tested low. In fact, the students were randomly assigned to the two groups, regardless of academic abilities. At the end of the semester, guess which group had the better grades? The group the teachers thought would do better actually did do better. Conversely, the teachers’ negative expectations for the other group was a significant factor in the group’s poor showing. Negative expectations from teachers and parents discourage children from trying.

Our children can sense when we expect the worst from them, even if we don't use the words. If you believe your child is hopeless in math you can say, "I know you can do this," but your tone of voice will give a different message. Or perhaps you wait only a few seconds for your child to answer a question and then hurriedly give him the answer. You and your child may not even be consciously aware of this difference, but the message is received: "You don't think I can get it."

Overprotection

When we step in and do for children what they could eventually do for themselves, we send the message that "you can't handle it." Children must be free to overcome their frustrations, solve their own problems, and accept the consequences of their choices if they are to develop the stamina required to succeed in school and in the community. The overprotected child easily gives up when things are difficult. She is quick to shout, "it's not fair" at the slightest transgression. She looks for someone else to solve her problems and lives with many unrealistic fears that hamper her growth.

Think of the problems such attitudes cause in the classroom, where teachers cope with 25 or more students and must rely on a degree of independence from each one. An overprotected child who expects special treatment at school is in for a frustrating, discouraging time.



How can a parent tell when she is offering reasonable protection and when she is overprotecting? Two rules of thumb may help:

1. Ask yourself what is the worst that could happen if you don't step in.
2. Never do for your child on a regular basis what your child can do for herself. Be on guard against the rationalization, "But it's easier to do it myself." It may be easier and faster in the short run but think of the damage you do in the long run. Eventually your child may not be able to DO much of anything for himself, including school work, that presents a challenge.