

Student Encouragement: Principles and Practice

A child needs encouragement like a plant needs water¹

This action brief is based on the work of Maurice Balson² whose work stands the test of time and is supported by more recent research. Balson based his recommendations for student encouragement on psychological theories of child and adolescent behaviour, especially Adlerian psychology and the work of Dinkmeyer and Dreikers³.

The fundamental principle is that encouragement builds positive attitudes towards school and learning, develops self-confidence and engagement, and creates feelings of satisfaction and progress, all of which boost learning. On the other hand, discouragement builds negative attitudes toward school and learning, develops loss of confidence, and disengagement, and creates feelings of incompetence and inadequacy, all of which deter learning and can lead to behaviour problems.



Student Encouragement: Principles and Practice

1. Emphasise capabilities and strengths (be positive)

This is not to say that errors should be ignored; rather, this is a matter of balance and sensitivity. It is preferable to be selective in pointing out errors and not to daunt the student with too many at once. Also, it is preferable to encourage venturing (having a go) rather than being afraid to make mistakes; build a culture where mistakes are not embarrassing or ridiculed but an opportunity for learning.

Do:

- ✓ interpret capabilities/progress
- ✓ boost self-confidence in abilities
- ✓ focus on future improvement
- ✓ accept mistakes as learning opportunities
- ✓ acknowledge effort positively

Don't:

- ✗ stress deficiencies/weaknesses
- ✗ use personal criticism/ridicule
- ✗ perseverate on past mistakes
- ✗ suggest mistakes are failings
- ✗ denigrate effort as ineffectual

2. Focus on the action not the actor (be objective)

Focusing on the student's work rather than the student removes an element of ego/emotion—it is the work that is excellent or inadequate not the person. Recognising effort encourages personal agency (belief that effort can make a difference); recognising feelings encourages personal awareness and self-direction.

Do:

- ✓ interpret progress objectively
- ✓ show confidence in student
- ✓ show empathy with student
- ✓ reflect/interpret their personal feelings
- ✓ encourage self-direction/ownership

Don't:

- ✗ use personal praise/denigration⁴
- ✗ show disappointment
- ✗ suggest hopelessness
- ✗ attribute personal deficiencies
- ✗ undermine student self-respect

In essence, encouragement: emphasises progress; acknowledges effort; supports self-evaluation; develops self-confidence; shows acceptance and respect; is unrestricted (available to all); and is unpatronising.

Student Encouragement: Examples

Emphasise capabilities and strengths (be positive)

Do:

✓ interpret capabilities/progress

*You achieved a (particular) standard
You showed (good) knowledge of A
Here are some things that need more work*

✓ boost self-confidence in abilities

*You should be really pleased with your progress
You've made a good start; let's do even better
Yes you can—and I'll help you do it*

✓ focus on future improvement

*Here are some things you need to improve
Have a go—don't worry about being wrong*

✓ accept mistakes as learning ops

*What can you learn from this/these mistake/s
Where do you need/want to put your effort now*

✓ acknowledge effort positively

*I can see you put a lot into that (tried hard)
Would you like to share that with the class
You're not the first to find this difficult*

Don't:

✗ stress deficiencies/weaknesses

*... adding 'but' ...
Look at all these errors
You are going backwards*

✗ use personal criticism/ridicule

*You're just hopeless/dreadful
I think you're not even trying
I don't think you'll ever succeed*

✗ persevere on past mistakes

*Look at all the mistakes you've made
You are just making too many errors*

✗ suggest mistakes are failings

*You are a real scatterbrain/dumbo
This is a calamity; you are a failure*

✗ denigrate effort as ineffectual

*It has all been just a waste of time
How could you have learned so little
Everyone found this easy except you*



Student Encouragement: Examples

Focus on the action not the actor (be objective)

Do:

✔ interpret progress objectively

*These (aspects) show strengths/weaknesses
This (task) shows application/imagination/skill
I like/dislike these (aspects of the work)*

✔ show confidence in student

*I know you can do it if you try
Yes, I know it is tough/difficult
Keep trying; don't give up*

✔ show empathy with student

*You must have found that really hard
You should be pleased with your progress
It looks like you enjoyed that
Let's try it together*

✔ reflect/interpret personal feelings

*Which bits are you most satisfied with (proud of)
What have you learned about yourself from this
You'll feel good when you master it*

✔ encourage self-direction/ownership

*What have you learned (most) about (topic)
Which bits do you think are your best
What do you think needs most improvement*

Don't:

✘ use personal praise/denigration

*You are an excellent/dreadful student
You are my best/worst student ever
You are in my good/bad books*

✘ show disappointment

*That was a waste of effort
Don't expect any sympathy from me
You're a real shirker*

✘ suggest hopelessness

*It's really easy and you get it wrong
It's probably beyond your capability
How could you possibly do so badly
You will probably never be any good*

✘ attribute personal deficiencies

*You are a failure at everything
What's wrong with you
You'll never succeed at anything*

✘ undermine student self-respect

*Nothing you've done is of any worth
I'm going to make you do it until it's right
You're so far behind, you'll never catch up*

1. R. Dreikurs and P. Cassel, *Discipline without tears*, Alfred Adler Institute, Ontario, 1972.
2. Maurice Balson, *Understanding Classroom Behaviour*, Melbourne, ACER, 1982, 1988, 1992, 1996.
3. D. Dinkmeyer and R. Dreikers, *Encouraging children to learn: The encouragement process*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963.
4. Research shows that praise can be destructive of personal identity. For those who receive it, praise creates a need to feel accepted and encourages the belief that 'I'm successful because (and when) I'm appreciated'; for those who don't, it sets up a threat of being rejected ('Nothing I do is good enough; I'm worthless').