

Taking Risks as Children

By Richard W. DeHaven

Thomas Edison was undoubtedly one of the most successful inventors of our time. And just what type of personality allowed him to fail at thousands and thousands of experiments, yet be driven to continue on until he achieved the successful outcomes he sought? Clearly he was a person for whom risk-taking and acceptance of failures had become a normal, non-threatening, and even healthy aspect of life.

*"No, that's not the way to do it."
"Here, let me do it for you."
"When are you going to become responsible?"
"Why can't you even clean your room?"*

Do any of these phrases ring any bells with you? They should! At one time or another, probably each of us has used, or had used against us, such words of discouragement.

Breaking the habit of *discouraging* language and developing positive, *encouraging* language isn't easy and can't be learned overnight. But with persistence, patience, and practice, we can all learn to do it.

When we first begin eliminating our discouraging behavior and replacing it with encouraging talk is when the most care and patience is needed. The new talk may come as a jolt to both the user and the receiver. One transitional approach can be to tell your child something like, "I know it's hard... I understand." Equally helpful are such affirmations as "I think you can handle it" or "Do you want to give it a *try*?"

As the new, *encouraging* talk becomes the norm, the range of opportunities for encouraging are almost limitless. Here are but a few specific examples:
*"Wow, you're definitely improving. Look at the progress you've made."
"Gee, I like the way you did that."
"I have faith in you; I know you'll do fine."
"Boy, you worked hard on that; I like the way you tackle a problem."
"Maybe you can find another way to make it work."
"It looks like you enjoyed doing that."
"Thanks, you helped a lot."
"I appreciate what you did."
"I'm glad you enjoy learning."*

Recognition of *improvement* should always be couched in terms of how the child (or adult) is performing with respect to himself or herself, *not* to others. "Great! You have two more Bs than on the last report card" is always better than "You're still not performing as well as your sister."

What's the key to developing such a healthy viewpoint? It starts with how parents treat their children, especially during the first few years of life when the foundation of personality is being developed.

The idea is to foster the maximum level of curiosity and risk-taking. (Note: Risk-taking, as used here does *not* mean taking dangerous risks with your body or health) Unfortunately, many parents do just the opposite and never realize it!

We need to recognize and avoid the use of *discouraging* language. Here's a sampling of such negativism:

*"You can't do it; let me do it for you."
"You aren't old enough (or big enough) for that."
"Why can't you be more like your brother?"
"Be careful! You watch yourself!"
"You did it again, didn't you?"
"No! I've told you a thousand times!"*

Parents also need to show liberal recognition for both what has been learned (mental tasks) and what has been done (physical tasks): "You have learned to count to ten" and "You have put ten of your toys away." In addition, be careful to show trust, respect, and belief in your child; for example you might say, "Let me know which book *you decide* to read."

In encouraging you child to learn and do as much as possible, certain boundaries and limits must still be maintained. One is with regard to the child's safety.

Obviously, special care must be taken to provide adequate protection from medicines, toxic household

chemicals, fire, burns, electrical shock, and other potentially serious hazards within the child's environment. And in today's society it is doubly important that we ensure the child knows how to gauge the issue of who to trust.

With proper attention given to the child's safety, parents are then free to unleash their own creativity in helping their child do and learn as much as possible. The benefits are well worth the effort. The experienced child who is not afraid of risking failures is invariably happier, more emotionally stable, and, like Thomas Edison, another big step up the ladder of success.

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