

WHAT YOU FOCUS ON GROWS

What do you want to grow in your child? Generosity, respect, strength, integrity, honesty, humility, perseverance. Whatever aspect of your child you put attention on will grow and develop. Many parents, misunderstanding this natural law, put their focus daily on the aspects they find most irritating or troubling.

When children are criticized, they don't think, "No, you're wrong about me. I'm really a very good child." They don't question us; they question themselves, their worth. If a child hears, "What's wrong with you? Why are you so mean? You never listen. You're selfish. You're lazy, etc., etc." he puts his focus on the value that he perceives has been placed on him. So if he hears, "You're so lazy" enough times, he will believe that he is lazy, and guess what?

What qualities do you want to grow in your child? Write a list of the qualities you want your child to have. I don't mean talents. This is not trying to make your child be someone he's not. For instance: I want my child to have self-confidence. If this is the quality you want to grow in your child, you wouldn't be supporting that growth by saying something like, "You're so shy? Why can't you ever speak up? You let your friends walk all over you. You're being a wimp. Don't you have a mind of your own?" This child will focus on how bad it is that she is shy and how incapable that makes her to stand up for herself. She will likely feel badly about being shy as she grows.

Instead put your attention on what you want to grow. Watch for times when she shows capability (there are many if you put your attention on watching for the positive rather than the negative). Tell her things like, "I noticed the way you asked for what you wanted. You certainly know your own mind, don't you?" Or, "Boy you got really mad about that. I can see how important that was to you. You wanted that and you let everyone know." You can turn difficult situations into positive learning experiences depending on your responses.

Or, if your child is extremely dramatic and being shy and retiring is hardly the problem, catch yourself with negative remarks like, "Why do you always have to take everything so personally? Just let it go. Don't get so upset over such trivial things." Or the classic, "If you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about!" Instead, watch for times you can support the growth you want to encourage with comments like, "I know how upsetting something like that must feel to you. I think it was great how you got over it so quickly and were able to move on."

Focus on admiring your children. All of our children, no matter how frustrating they are or how different their reactions are from yours, have qualities that you love and admire. I have never met a parent who can't tell me something wonderful about their child. Watch for what that is. Find little snippets of it daily.

It's there. Encourage and support that quality.

Praise is a different thing. Stay away from, "Good job, good boy, that's wonderful, I think it's beautiful, etc." Be specific with your encouragement. When you genuinely see something you admire about your child, praise will seem superficial and trite. If your three-year-old says something wonderfully amazing, instead of just smiling or laughing, really look at your child with awe and say, "You have a wonderful mind. How amazing that you would think of something like that to say. You could be a great writer with thoughts like that." You will plant seeds in your child's mind that will grow, especially if those seeds are consistently nurtured.

An artist tells of how he got started as a child. He drew some normal, childish pictures and his older brother made fun of them and laughed at them. In anger and humiliation, the young artist quickly tore his pictures into pieces. His little sister gasped in horror, grabbed the pieces and ran off. Much later he passed her room and saw his pictures taped together and hung on her wall. He asked what she was doing with them. She said, "I just love this tree and these flowers, and that person." Her focus on what she loved about what he had done was enough to encourage him to continue to draw.

Our children need our encouragement, especially when they are showing troubling behavior. These are the times that are so easy to criticize and humiliate—we amazingly think our negative comments will teach them to shape up—and so hard to find those moments of great competence. When those moments, even when few and far between, are watered and fertilized, competence will grow.