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.
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.

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<td>stress deficiencies/weaknesses</td>
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<td>boost self-confidence in abilities</td>
<td>use personal criticism/ridicule</td>
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<td>focus on future improvement</td>
<td>perseverate on past mistakes</td>
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<td>accept mistakes as learning opportunities</td>
<td>suggest mistakes are failings</td>
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<td>acknowledge effort positively</td>
<td>denigrate effort as ineffectual</td>
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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.

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<td>show disappointment</td>
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<td>show empathy with student</td>
<td>suggest hopelessness</td>
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<tr>
<td>reflect/interpret their personal feelings</td>
<td>attribute personal deficiencies</td>
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<td>encourage self-direction/ownership</td>
<td>undermine student self-respect</td>
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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

- **perseverate 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
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

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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’).

This work can be cited as: Maxwell, G.S., Cumming, J.J., Wyatt-Smith, C.M. and Colbert, P., Student encouragement: Principles and practice, Griffith University, Brisbane, 2012.