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Using Constructive Criticism to Help Children Learn at Home

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As parents, we have an obligation to teach our children to conduct themselves properly, treat others as they would like to be treated, be respectful, always do their best work, and hopefully, learn from their mistakes. This requires us to offer our children constructive criticism in order to help them accomplish these goals. When children make mistakes or do something wrong, we must take advantage of teachable moments and provide meaningful suggestions to correct or redirect them without deflating their self-esteem or driving a wedge between our parent-child relationships.

As parents, we are always ready to offer what we believe is constructive criticism; however, sometimes we can't always determine that very fine line between constructive criticism and criticizing. Children want and need their parents' approval. When parents openly or publicly dole out criticisms, children shut down, believe they are a disappointment, feel like a failure, and may refuse to change or correct their mistakes. Voicing criticisms without the "constructive" part accomplishes nothing; it is simply criticizing. Guiding and teaching children to do tasks or behave appropriately by setting examples or providing "tips" or clever information constructively sends the message that we care about them and want to help them succeed.

Tips for Providing Constructive Criticism at Home

Unless children are doing something that poses a high risk of disastrous results, sometimes it's best to let them figure things out on their own and learn through the experience rather than telling them step-by-step what they should or shouldn't have done or could've done better. Experience is sometimes the best teacher. "Constructive criticism" should be encouraging, helpful, and timely – not negative. When offering children constructive criticism about their work, behaviors, or attempts at doing things on their own, think about the following...



- Even through your frustration or exasperation with your child, refrain from using belittling language, using an angry or frustrated tone of voice, or making fun of their honest mistakes. Children have feelings too. Imagine you are the recipient of the advice—How would you want someone to help or teach you?



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- When there is a need to critique, be ready to teach. Have your child's undivided attention before voicing your concerns. Direct your constructive criticisms toward the behavior or mistake, not the child. Set the example of what you want your children to learn by taking the time to show them or share how you learned as a child what they're attempting to do. Don't have the "Do as I say..." attitude. Ask "May I tell/show you what usually works for me?" "Let me show you what helps me..." "When I was your age, Grandpa/my teacher/my coach taught me to..." Offer the child an opportunity to correct his/ her mistake whether it's repeating a chore that wasn't done properly or correcting an inappropriate or incorrect behavior.



- Never make one-sided, hurtful comments; be ready to address specific actions or behaviors with a lesson or helpful and thoughtful suggestion. Using positive words yields positive results. "You really do _____ well. Next time, you might also try..." "This way helped me a lot when I was learning to..."



- Never use name-calling or label, even in jest. Imagine if someone called you "Grace" because you stumble often or called you "Einstein" when you failed a test – even worse, in front of other people. Never openly criticize children in front of others. It's hard enough to accept criticism, even constructive criticism, when there is an audience present.



- Take advantage of teachable moments by offering your help and constructive criticism – unless it really just isn't the time or place to do so. Timing is everything; don't wait until the child has forgotten the incident or mistake. Make it clear to your child that you are offering suggestions and constructive criticism so



he/she can do better next time. Don't dwell on your child's past mistakes. Constructive criticism is for the future, not the past.



- Use a voice that has the tone of a helpful attitude. A knee-jerk reaction of screaming and yelling or using other derogatory remarks deflates self-esteem and falls on deaf ears. If your child hears anger in your voice, that's all he/she will hear. Our goal as parents is to give constructive criticism as painlessly and tactfully as possible so the child will receive it properly and learn from it.



- Remember, sometimes the best thing to say is nothing at all. When children realize their own mistakes, they are less likely to repeat them. There is nothing to gain by pointing out and dwelling on their mistakes when it's obvious they learned something from them.

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