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Parents' Top Tips for Helping a Discouraged Child

Can anything cause more instant heartbreak for a parent than the sight of a dispirited child? And children with learning and attention difficulties experience more than their fair share of discouragement as they struggle to learn.

Research tells us that when a child is overcome by a strong emotion like discouragement, you must first deal with the emotion before trying to tackle the problems that caused the emotion.

That's also what parents who are members of our MVP (Most Valuable Parent) Research Club seem to do intuitively. The MVP club is composed of parents who have signed up to participate in projects aimed at helping us better understand their needs and to refine our offerings. We asked them, "What is your top tip for helping when your child is discouraged?" Here are their tips, sorted into ten categories, starting with ways to empathize with your child's discouragement.

1. Show empathy.
2. Hit the "Reset" button.
3. Focus on the positive.
4. Break it down.
5. Help them be superheroes.
6. Foster motivation.
7. Look at the big picture.
8. Take the long-term view.
9. Coax a smile.
10. Your child is not alone.

1. Show empathy.

Each child learns differently — and expresses his emotions differently, too. As Dr. Robert Brooks reminds us, children may mask discouragement with such behavior as avoiding, quitting, clowning, denying, acting angry, or being impulsive.

So the first step is to recognize how he acts when he's discouraged, then to empathize with him. How? One child may be comforted by talking directly about his feelings. Another may need a round-about approach.

Fiona from Queensland, Australia, fosters a deeper sense of empathy with her child by taking an indirect route. "I talk about my own childhood, relating a similar situation. My daughter asks questions about how I solved the problem or what I was feeling discouraged about. Sometimes my stories are slightly embellished, but this opens up the lines of communication."

Michelle from Massachusetts shows her child that things don't always come easily to her, either. "When she was younger and was struggling with handwriting, I paid my bills while she was at the table. I started a check, then tore it up a couple of times. This got her attention. 'What are you doing?' I explained that I had made a mistake and had to start over, with a 'no big deal' attitude."

For Donna of Florida's child, a more direct acknowledgment works. "We stop what we are doing at the time, and just chat for awhile. After a little time goes by, we try to find a more effective way of doing whatever was causing the discouragement."

The key is to open the lines of communication. Michelle of California reports, "I try to put myself in my child's shoes and listen. That's most important — listening to what your child is really saying. You'd be surprised how much is accomplished by doing just that."

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2. Hit the "Reset" button.

Desiree of Texas says, "I encourage my son to stop, take three slow breaths, then try again. We call it hitting the 'Reset' button."

Nancy from New Hampshire agrees. "I engage her in another activity where she can succeed, like baking cookies or helping to prepare dinner. These help defuse the situation."

Cindy of Missouri has learned that "My son seems to problem-solve better if he puts some distance between himself and the situation that has upset him. We usually do one of my son's favorite activities, such as tennis, chess, or going to a bookstore. Later, he is able to go back and review the problem more objectively."

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3. Focus on the positive.

Jennie from Virginia catches her child doing something good — for him — and compliments the effort. She advises, "Try to ignore behavior you disapprove of as much as possible. Instead, try to have many more compliments and positive statements than negative ones. Then watch your child blossom."

Jenny from Kansas concurs. "When he is discouraged, we play a game called 'Let's make a list!,' to look at the situation more objectively. Instead of focusing on what he can't do, we make a list of the things that he can do."

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4. Break it down.

Nikki from Minnesota says, "I work with my son step by step until he is feeling more confident in himself. Sometimes it takes two minutes, sometimes it takes 20, but he always feels better about himself."

Jennifer from New York agrees. "I find less stress when we break down homework into 20-minute intervals."

Valerie of New York breaks tasks down not by time spent but by ability. "When my child is discouraged, I look for portions of the problem that he has successfully completed. Then we begin to

reconstruct the task, finding ways to successfully solve the elusive portion. This teaches him to separate an obstacle into smaller, more approachable tasks and to build from the familiar."

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5. Help them be superheroes.

Your child may not be able to fly like Superman, but he can excel at something equally stupendous. Many parents counteract the child's frustration by nurturing his superpowers.

"My son loves looking at houses, possibly to become an architect, so we went to a Parade of Homes." — Candy, Tennessee

"My daughter hates to read but loves drama. I enrolled her in acting classes offered at our local school for performing arts. She has fun, builds confidence, and is motivated to read the scripts and song lyrics." — Sharon, California

"My son's learning to fly, something that others his age probably don't get to do." — Judy, Texas

"A sport that is perfect for self confidence in LD kids is sailing. They are naturals when you put them on a sail boat." — Bebe, Maryland

"I have three boys with LD. One got hooked on cars. Reading car magazines is how he broke the code and learned to read. When he feels discouraged, we pull out favorite magazines or take a trip to the car lot. One loves sports, so we watch a game, or go outside and toss a ball around. All of my boys love the outdoors, so I now have three Eagle Scouts. Whatever they love and makes them feel good is what you have to do." — Deb, Arkansas

6. Foster motivation.

"We learned our best tip from our son's teacher," says Eric of California. "She reminded us to reward his willingness, not just his completion of homework. I immediately cut back to an amount of homework that would not fatigue him, then made doing it with a good attitude necessary to get 'credit.' He gets 5-10 points for each homework session done willingly. Each point is worth one minute of video game playing. It's worked like a charm."

"This skill of being able to quickly change his attitude at will should serve him well in life," Eric continues. "While developing this skill is relying on outward rewards now, in time we hope he'll switch to a good attitude to feel better and get the task done quicker."

Donna from Ohio also stresses effort. She asks her boys, "Are you doing **your** best? That's all I'm asking."

"I use a bag of tricks," relays Rakefet from Israel, "but not all at once! Sometimes we switch to another activity to cause him to think about something else. Other times, we plan ahead so that when he's discouraged, we can talk about those future plans. And sometimes it takes only an ice cream cone to cheer him up."

Kari from Virginia also motivates her twins with rewards they love. "I use the First-Then Method: First we do our homework. Then we can go to Toys-R-Us. It works for my kids to accomplish any goal, large or small."

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7. Look at the big picture.

A discouraged child has tunnel vision. He can't see that this dark moment will pass. But you can help him out of the tunnel.

Trisha from California points out the struggles of others. "I explain that many famous people with LD have had the same challenges. With persistence and support, they have overcome those struggles and have made a difference in the world."

Kristy of California and Maree of Wisconsin do the same. Kristy and her son read books about other people who struggle, so he knows he isn't alone. Maree points to people in the news and in sports as examples. "I show my child that they don't give up and that they have to practice until they get it right."

Sylvia from Pennsylvania helps her child look at what he has overcome and how far he has progressed.

Julie from Indiana counsels her child that "the whole world is still waiting to be discovered and that the one problem of today will not seem so bad tomorrow."

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8. Take the long-term view.

Remind your child what Dr. Mel Levine often tells parents: School is the only time our children are expected to excel in every subject.

Dede of California concurs. "I tell children that school is the most difficult thing they will ever have to do — trying to learn different subjects under pressure and well. The rest of their lives will be a breeze compared to this!"

Kathryn from Colorado adds, "No one succeeds the first time, and with every try, you learn something. I tell my son that giving up is not an option. It may take him a long time, but the journey to the goal is where the real growth and experiences that are valuable in life take place."

Marisa of California also stresses a future pay-off. "I tell him the hard work he is putting in now will make things easier for him as he gets older."

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9. Coax a smile.

Sometimes, laughter and good times together are the antidote to discouragement.

Ellen from Florida sends her daughter a funny email to brighten her mood.

Florence of New Mexico spends quality time with her child away from siblings. She says, "Sometimes extra time at home working on a project shows her how we can have fun working together."

Michelle of New York advises, "Never underestimate how much the power of feeling good on the outside impacts the inside! We leave the boys home and get our nails done. It costs only \$5 for her, and she feels special."

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10. Your child is not alone.

Heidi from Massachusetts says, "When my son is discouraged, we work it out as a team. I always remind him that he is not alone in life. There are people here to help him."

Most important is for your child to know what Michelle from Michigan conveys to her child: "Don't give up, keep trying, and whatever you need to help you, I'm here, and we'll figure it out together."

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