

by John M. Platt

Before I studied the works of Adler and Dreikurs, I found that as a high school teacher, the failing notices that I sent home were most ineffective. Some students improved for a short time but then usually fell back to their daily discouragement and poor performance level.

I began to realize that possibly sending something home to the parents regarding the child's improvement would be more encouraging than what I had been doing in the past. I studied the ideas of the Adlerian approach and I saw the whole concept of encouragement as a means of helping students improve their performance level.

At this point I decided to begin sending what I called "Letters of Encouragement" home to parents. The more parents that I talked with regarding the problems they had with their children the more I realized how discouraged the parents were.

A few reasons I decided to change from failure notices to letters of encouragement were:

1. Discouragement is the best motivation to do something wrong or not even try.
2. If a child is discouraged it is probable that the parents are also discouraged.
3. Letters of encouragement usually build a positive relationship between parents and teacher, parents and child, and teacher and child.
4. It might be possible to teach parents about the helpful use of positive attention rather than negative attention.

The letter of encouragement could include the following:

1. Write a letter about improvement in any area, not necessarily completion of a near perfect project. The emphasis needs to be on the process of the child's attempting to do better, not the product.
2. It is better to write something about how the first few minutes of the day or class period went, especially if this time was better than the previous day. Waiting until the child completes a full day without problems will often eliminate the chance for you to write a note.
3. It is important to send notes to students that are not academic or behavior problems also; however, students that present problems need more encouragement than others.
4. Make truthful statements. If you say Johnny is now such a nice child when in reality he has shown little improvement, he accepts this as just another gimmick to "make him" be nice.
5. Be specific. It is best not to make generalized statements about improvement (Example: "Johnny is really working at his long vowel sounds" versus "Johnny is reading much better.")
6. In order to emphasize the child's developing social interest, it is important to mention how his behavior has been helpful to others.

7. Through the letter, attempt to teach the parents a positive way of working with their children. The following example of a letter of encouragement has an introductory paragraph that is written with this idea in mind:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. S.

It seems to me that many times we put a great deal of emphasis on things we do wrong or that others do wrong. I have found that looking for positive things others do and building on these strengths is more helpful to all concerned.

With this in mind I just wanted you to know that today Johnny showed real improvement in his work with the reading group. He worked very hard at paying attention to the task and responded to three followup questions the teacher asked.

Because of his cooperative work the rest of the group was able to work together better and all gained a great deal from the reading group.

Just thought you would like to know how your son is doing. I'm sure you are quite proud of him.

Many teachers believe that writing these kinds of letters take too much time. This letter took two and a half minutes to write, address and stamp the envelope.

IMPORTANT POST-SCRIPT: If your intention for sending out a letter of encouragement is to get the "little monster to keep quiet," it probably won't work." If you send a letter because you really believe the student has contributed, helped, and/or improved and that a person needs to know this now and then, positive results may occur.