




OPTIMISTIC THINKING

Home Connection: Encouragement Folders



TEACHER NOTES

Hearing and seeing specific, positive comments about one's self fosters the habit of Optimistic Thinking. This activity also provides an opportunity to reinforce the advantages of intentional language of support over generalized praise.

Students will decorate the outside of a folder with their names and some personal put-ups, and then invite others to add their encouraging words to the inside of the folder. When advising students on phrases to choose, suggest specificity over generality.

| SPECIFIC PHRASES ABOUT EFFORT, SUCH AS... | INSTEAD OF GENERAL PRAISE... |
|---|------------------------------|
| I admire what a hard worker you are—you take your time and do quality work! | You're great. |
| I love how you really stick to your work, even when things are hard! | Good work! |
| I enjoy hearing what you're thinking about—your ideas and questions are so interesting! | You're smart! |
| I'm proud of how well you can focus when you're learning! | Great job! |
| What a generous person you are! Love that — love you! | You're nice. |



PREPARATION:

Print double-sided homework handouts, with student instructions on the front and parent information on the back.

Provide each student with a plain manila file folder or a 12" x 18" piece of light-colored construction paper, folded in half. When completed, Encouragement Folders can be used as "privacy folders" to block out distractions during testing, work sessions, or when students want a focusing aid.



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TIPS

If desired, have students begin the initial steps of writing their names and a few positive phrases and brief statements about themselves as thinkers and workers on the outside of the folder before sending home for others' additions. This will reinforce your goal of the encouragements being about effort rather than general praise—even though students will appreciate any supportive language others write on their folders at home!

This type of assignment lends itself to an extended due date. Consider assigning it as a “Friday-to-Friday” project: assigned one Friday, due the next.



EXTENSION

When students bring their Encouragement Folders back to school, use them to build a routine of intentionally helping students shift their thoughts and feelings.

Schedule regular times during which you instruct the group to pull out their Encouragement Folders and take two minutes of silent reading time to remind themselves of what they and others wrote. When the timer goes off to signal the two minutes is up, suggest that students choose one of their personal affirmations to focus on.

Notice how you're feeling after reading your encouraging words! Pay attention to how your body feels. Try to hold on to these strong, happy feelings as you choose one of the positive statements from your folder. Repeat it, silently, three times to yourself. As we begin our next lesson, hold on to your good feelings and your positive thoughts. Let's work hard and help each other!



ADAPTATION

Teachers, classmates, and other members of the school community could also be invited to add their encouraging words, if appropriate for individual students.

Name: _____

Homework due: _____

Encouragement Folder

I am growing an attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking about myself and my life in the past, present, and future.

INSTRUCTIONS

Decorate the outside of this folder with your name and some phrases that describe you as a thinker and a worker.

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS:

- I'm super persistent! I never give up!
- I listen thoughtfully.
- I work so carefully!
- I am fun to work with!

Then ask people whose opinion you value to add their own encouraging phrases and drawings to the inside of your folder.

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS:

- I admire how hard you work!
- I like how you really stick to it even when things are hard!
- I enjoy hearing your interesting ideas!
- I appreciate how you try hard and do your best.
- What a generous person you are! Love that—love you!

When you bring it back to school, you'll have a folder that reminds you of what a strong thinker and hard worker you are—and of how much people care about you!



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THOUGHTS FOR ADULTS SUPPORTING THIS PROJECT...

Our grandparents may have given us pep talks on the power of positive thinking. Leaders and elders we admired might have reminded us to “have a good attitude.” And now, brain researchers are helping explain why those words of wisdom were right on. It turns out that people can actually grow happier.

Although you cannot be with them all during their school day, contributing to your young person’s Encouragement Folder gives them a chance to hold onto your caring support while they do their best to learn. Your supportive thoughts will help them think and act in strong, positive ways.

Your student is learning to stop, take a breath, and then make a decision about how they want to think and act in stressful or challenging situations. When they repeat this same pattern of noticing, naming, and reframing, their brains actually build and strengthen new neural pathways. Helping our children recognize their feelings and control their attitudes gives them a head start toward being well-grounded and confident people.

KEEP IN MIND

Words are powerful. Long after we’ve parted company, the words we heard and the tone in which they were said stay with us. Focusing on specific examples of your young person’s abilities and strengths helps them believe that we really see them as an individual, and that we respect and admire them for who they are.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Whose words of encouragement do I remember? Why were they important enough to me that I still recall them now?
- When I picture my student’s face, what are things I can say that will light it up? How can my words encourage specific ways of thinking and acting?

EXTENSION IDEAS



- Write “Our Family” in the middle of a piece of construction paper and add a comment or two about your family’s strengths. Invite other family members to add their comments. Hang this in a high-traffic area of your home so it can be added to and enjoyed.
- Make Encouragement Posters for each person in your household. Each week, put a different person’s (or pet’s) name in the center. Have colored pencils or markers handy and invite family and visitors to add encouraging and supportive words and phrases about them.