

## **HELPFUL HINTS FOR EMPOWERING VS. ENABLING**

by Lynn Lott and Jane Nelsen

We have become vividly aware of how skilled most of us are in using enabling responses with our children, and how unskilled we are in using empowering responses.

Our definition of enabling is, "Getting between young people and life experiences to minimize the consequences of their choices." Enabling responses include:

1. **DOING TOO MUCH FOR THEM:** Doing things for kids that they could do for themselves, (bailing them out after bawling them out). "I can't believe you have procrastinated again. What will ever become of you? Okay, I'll do it this time, but next time you'll just have to suffer the consequences."
2. **GIVING THEM TOO MUCH:** Buying everything they want, cell phones, cars, insurance, clothes you can't afford, CDs, junk food. "Honey, I thought you would do your homework after I bought you a car, a cell phone, clothes I can't afford, and gave you a big allowance."
3. **BRIBING AND/OR REWARDING.** "You can have a new CD, allowance, cell phone, if you do your homework."
4. **OVERPROTECTING :** What to wear, when to wear coats so they won't get cold (as if they are too stupid to know or to learn on their own), picking their friends, extreme fear of danger. "Honey, you hurry and do as much as you can now while I pick out your clothes, and warm up the car so you won't be cold when I drive you to school."
5. **HOVERING:** Doing their laundry, waking them up in the morning, making their lunches, driving them places when they could walk or ride a bike, excusing them from helping the family because they have homework. "I just don't understand. I excused you from chores, I woke you up early, I drove you everywhere so you would have more time, I made your lunches. How could this be?"

6. LYING FOR THEM: Excuses to the teacher, writing notes when they just slept in, I won't tell Dad/Mom. "Okay, I'll write a note to the teacher that you were sick this morning, but you'll need to be sure and catch up."
7. PUNISHING/CONTROLLING: Grounding, taking away privileges, creating your agenda for them. "Well then, you are grounded and you lose all your privileges, no car, no TV, no friends, until it is done."
8. WHAT AND HOW LECTURES: Telling them what happened, what caused it to happen, how they should feel, and what they should do about it. "Well, no wonder. I saw you wasting your time on the boob tube and spending too much time with your friends and sleeping in. You should feel ashamed of yourself. You'd better shape up or you'll be shipping out to live on the streets like a bum."
9. HOW, WHAT, AND WHY CAN'T YOU LECTURES: "How many times have I told you to get your homework done early?" "Why can't you be more like your brother?" "Why can't you be more responsible?" "What will become of you?"
10. BLAMING AND SHAMING: "How could you ever do such a thing?" "How come you always forget and never get your homework done?" "I can't believe you would be so lazy."
11. LIVING IN DENIAL: "My child could never do such a thing." Being oblivious to the cultural mores regarding sex and drugs. Believing things are dangerous without educating yourself. "Well, honey, I'm sure you don't really need to do homework. It is a stupid thing for teachers to expect. You are smart enough to do just fine without it."
12. RESCUING/FIXING: Buying new things to replace what a child loses, hiring lawyers, staying up late to help with (or doing) last minute homework. "I'll hurry and do it for you while you get dressed and eat your breakfast. Sorry I won't be able to fix bacon, eggs, and waffles. I'm sure you'll do your homework tomorrow."

Our definition of empowering is turning over control to your kids so they have power over their own lives. The following suggestions are possibilities that can be used in response to the neglected homework challenge:

1. SHOW FAITH: "I have faith in you. I trust you to figure out what you need. I know that when it's important to you, you'll know what to do."
2. RESPECT PRIVACY: "I respect your privacy and want you to know I'm available if you want to discuss this with me."
3. EXPRESS YOUR LIMITS: Share what you think, how you feel, and what you want without lecturing, moralizing, insisting on agreement, or demanding that anyone give you what you want. "I'm not willing to go to school to bail you out. When your teacher calls, I'll hand the phone to you or tell her she'll need to discuss it with you." A respectful attitude and tone of voice is essential.
4. LISTEN WITHOUT FIXING, DISCOUNTING, OR JUDGING: "I would like to hear what this means for you."
5. CONTROL YOUR OWN BEHAVIOR: "I'm willing to take you to the library when we come to an agreement in advance for a convenient time, but I'm not willing to get involved at the last minute." "If you need my help with your homework, please let me know in advance."
6. DECIDE WHAT YOU WILL DO WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT. "I'm available to help with homework between 7:00 and 8:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I won't be available to help with last minute projects. If you'd like, I can teach you time management skills or show you how to set up a routine."
7. FOLLOW THROUGH WITH KINDNESS AND FIRMNESS. "I can see you are stressed about waiting until that last minute. I'm sure you'll figure it out. I'll be available Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7:00 to 8:00."
8. LETTING GO OF THEIR ISSUES WITHOUT ABANDONING THEM: "I hope you'll go to college, but I'm not sure it's important to you. I'm happy to talk about your thoughts or plans about college anytime you like."
9. AGREEMENT NOT RULES: "Could we sit down and see if we can work on a plan regarding homework that we both can live with? Let's put that on the agenda for the family meeting so we can work on an agreement."
10. LOVE AND ENCOURAGE: "I love you just the way you are and respect you to choose what is right for you."

11. ASK FOR HELP: "I need your help. Can you explain to me why it isn't important to you to do your homework?"

12. SHARE YOUR FEELINGS: Share your truth by using the "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ and I wish \_\_\_\_\_" process without expecting anyone else to feel the same or grant your wish. This is a great model for children to acknowledge their feelings and wishes without expectations. "I feel upset when you don't do your homework because I value education so much, and think it could be very beneficial to you in your life and I really wish you would do it."

13. JOINT PROBLEM-SOLVING: "What is your picture of what is going on regarding your homework? Would you be willing to hear my concerns? Could we brainstorm together on some possible solutions?"

14. RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION: "I'm feeling too upset to talk about this right now. Let's put it on the agenda for the family meeting so we can talk about it when I'm not so emotional."

15. INFORMATION VS. ORDERS: "I notice you spend a lot of time watching television and talking on the phone during the time you have set aside for homework." "I notice you often leave your homework until the last minute and then feel discouraged about getting it done."

16. ENCOURAGE LEARNING FROM MISTAKES: "I can see that you feel bad about getting that poor grade. I have faith in you to learn from this and figure out what you need to do to get the grade you would like."

As you look at the list of enabling responses and the list of empowering responses can you see how easy it could be to role-play based on your own experience with all the enabling behaviors? Do you, on the other hand, feel a lack of experience and skills in the empowering responses?

**COMMENTS:** These empowering statements and actions may not seem as powerful as they are to parents who are used to the short-range outcomes of controlling, rescuing or abandoning. The difficult part for parents is that turning power over to children often leads to mistakes and failure. It is only when we understand that learning from mistakes and failure is an important part of a successful life process will we also understand the importance of using these empowering statements and actions.