Encouragement as Bad as Discouragement

There is an absolutely horrible idea that is extremely popular in raising, teaching and generally working with children … *encouragement*. I know it sounds kind of shocking, but roll with me for a minute.

Kids are exploring who they are, what they are good at, what interests them, and a myriad of other concepts related to their goals and self-identity. This exploration is subtly negotiating the desires and skills of a child with the realities of the environment (people, markets, physics, etc). When left unimpeded, some interests will grow, some will wane, and all sorts of various subtle variations. The child might see an economic reality that shifts their desired profession, or they might lose interest in a hobby they aren't adequately able to express themselves with to their desire. A child's interests are a constantly evolving ecosystem.

In our society, we commonly and appropriately demonize discouragement because we see it as someone interjecting themselves into this exploration. Discouragement is a tool to distort the exploration of a child in favor of the insecurities and self-interest of the discourager. It is a means of the adult trying to live through their child. Discouragement is someone trying to tip and distort the scales within the ecosystem of a child's discovery process.

The last paragraph also perfectly describes the problems of encouragement. You are just tipping the scales on another direction, but you are still applying pressures that a child now needs to also consider. An interest that was once waning, they might feel compelled to continue because of their parents investment. The encouragement provides the same emotional pressures, but in the opposite direction. Sure, in the moment, discouragement is much more harsh and feels worse … but in both scenarios you are providing the equivalent scale tipping and ecosystem distortions.

As added downside to discouragement we get insecurity, and as an added downside to encouragement we get delusional self-image (the first several episodes of any season of *American Idol* gives you a good image of that). Yes, the immediate feelings of discouragement hurt more, but they are equivalent distortions in the long run.

What runs through people's minds when I've said this is "so I am supposed to be indifferent to my child's activities and not say anything? That seems horrible."

In some ways I suggest people to be indifferent. Be indifferent to their destination and dispassionately let them discover who they are. However, enjoy whatever you desire to enjoy and openly express this.

“I loved going to your concert” and “I think you have a beautiful voice” is different than saying “you should try out for this,” or “you can be famous.”

If my daughter asks me if she should play professional women’s soccer, I will say this … “I have no idea. While you seem skilled at this level, I’m not sure what your desires will be in the future, I’m not sure how your skills will develop, I’m not sure of almost anything in this realm to give you an informed opinion … and no one else is either. However, I enjoy going to your soccer matches, and if you continue to enjoy it, it might be something worth your time. That’s up to you.“

Kids can’t do anything they set their minds to. That’s a dangerous lie that promotes delusional behavior and ultimately leads to an extreme cynical view of reality.

While writing this I thought of a musical that had two very powerful songs that represent both sides of the coin in encouragement. From *In The Heights*, by the same guy who wrote the musical *Hamilton* (Lin Manuel Miranda) the song “Inutil” has a father who is incredibly discouraging (and abusive). Eventually the kid grows up to be very encouraging of his daughter … this is to the point that when she drops out of school she feels suffocated by the shame she feels … in the song “Breathe.” I doubt Miranda had the same philosophy I have on the matter, but the music he wrote reflects the realities and downsides of both encouragement and discouragement.