Always Believe in Yourself No Matter What Anyone Says: On Second Thought, Know When to Heed Advice and When to Go Alone

The year was 2003. *American Idol* had just soared to the top of the television charts in just its second season. For eight consecutive years to follow, it would rank number one as complete unknowns suddenly found themselves as household names. By season ten, almost 750 million people would call in to vote on their favorite performer. As *Idol* producers travelled to different cities looking for new talent, young people would camp out for days at a time just for a shot at Hollywood and superstardom. Soon after, locales and organizations began holding their own version of *Idol* competitions as everyone seemed to yearn for a chance to show off their hidden talent. Yet beneath all the soulful, harmonious sounds, another storyline soon broke through of a very different nature and captured audiences in its own way. They were the auditions that never should have happened. Although some of the singers were undoubtedly driven by an opportunity for a few moments of fame (or infamy), what made many of the train wreck tryouts so compelling was the singer truly thought he or she had brilliance yet unrealized; even worse, when confronted with the obvious reality, the singer remained defiant to a truth that many others, including the judges, had tried to pass along.

As young kids, most of us are taught the importance of believing in ourselves no matter what...We hear this message conveyed many ways, whether by the people we know well, quotes that have been passed along, or images and messages conveyed on a variety of screens. We have heard repeatedly about the author whose book was rejected twenty times before selling millions of copies or the inventor who peddled for years despite mockery, only to create something that changed the planet for good. It is understandable. We all want our kids to excel. And none of us want our kids to lack in confidence, or self-esteem, even as questions increasingly loom about whether the pursuit of self-esteem may be a false idol.

Yet beneath the message of self-reliance lies some bigger issues. One is the fact that no matter how brilliant or talented or capable a person is, they rely on feedback and modeling from an early age to help mold them into who they will become. It suggests that instead of focusing on believing in yourself, our attention as parents would be better served in helping youth discern the difference between important, and potentially formative, criticism and advice, versus messages of degradation, derision, and cruelty.

Although some may believe this is an easy judgment to make, I would suggest that as parents and professionals, our judgement is often clouded by our own personal experiences. For one, many people today regard authority as synonymous with abuse, or at least authoritarianism, instead of authoritateness (see August 2013 article entitled "When to Control--When to Let Go"). Whether it is because of early family dysfunction or perceived punitive experiences by a teacher, caregiver, or professional, many see authority figures as people whose primary goal is to inhibit and restrain the natural progression of an individual. Therefore, messages are often passed along that authority should be subverted, ignored, or challenged, and that each person should follow his or her own heart at all
costs. Unfortunately, when this message is repeatedly internalized, a person often grows up alienating others, even those that truly have his or her best interests at heart.

Beyond the perception of authority, all of us struggle to a varied degree to distinguish between constructive criticism versus destructive criticism. Constructive criticism not only focuses on particular aspects of behavior or patterns that can be improved, but it also provides ways in which this can occur. Ideally, this is presented in the context of a loving situation, but as personalities and circumstances differ, it may not always carry a sweet, loving tone. Yet if it is truly constructive, it does not demean the individual in worthless fashion, but seeks to identify areas of weakness or deficiency that can be improved, not those (i.e., height, facial features, or ethnicity) than cannot be. In contrast, destructive criticism is a direct attack at the worth or competence of an individual, with no purpose of providing support or advice for how a fault can be bettered. It often occurs in situations of power, manipulation, or bitterness, and seeks as its ultimate goal to lower an individual, not provide means of ascension through self-improvement. Teaching the difference between the two is vital for our kids.

Still, any education on this topic must come with instruction on self-control, emotional regulation, and self-reflection. We have all experienced the pangs of getting negative feedback, whether it was how we looked in a picture or spoke in a public forum or performed on a larger stage. Anyone who says it doesn’t hurt (at least a little) has either achieved the rare feat of self-actualization or has become disconnected from the feedback as a whole. We all want to believe that what we are doing is worthwhile and good. Yet, it is at this moment of discomfort that we really must teach our kids the art of self-reflection that requires a few basic steps.

The first is basic emotional awareness and regulation. Although anger (and the thoughts that accompany it) might seem like our first reaction, it is almost always a secondary response that is preceded by another feeling, whether that is guilt, disappointment, anxiety, or confusion. If we don’t recognize our first reaction and simply follow the furious route, then there is a good chance that we will miss an initial opportunity for self-reflection that could lead to further growth, not a vengeful or avoidant response. If we are too upset from the beginning to even hear what is being said, there is little chance that the words will leave a helpful impression at all.

The second issue is that we must learn to recognize that sometimes good advice comes from people we don’t know well, or just don’t like. We might be more willing to get feedback from someone that we trust and admire. But when it comes from someone who bothers or even infuriates us, our first inclination is just to dismiss what they say because we regard them as a pest or a jerk. As noted earlier, we should be cautious about a person’s intent. But by automatically disregarding criticism because of our dislike of an individual, we may be potentially missing opportunities to learn about ourselves in ways that our close friends and family are reluctant to divulge for fear of creating a rift.

If we can learn (and teach our kids) to regulate our emotions and not disregard the message for the messenger, then we reach a final step. It is to truly take some time to consider the message that is being sent, and reflect deeply on whether patterns or circumstances in our lives may provide some evidence that the message is true. Years ago, as I was winding up my formal training, I was fortunate to
have a supervisor who really challenged me, although I did not feel fortunate then. At a time when most of the feedback was positive and I was being given wide latitude to practice, she pushed me to use different means of really assessing whether I was performing well. At one point, when she asked me to tape a couple of sessions for further review, I resisted her request, and was bothered that she was asking me to do this at this juncture. What I later realized was that I was mistaking frustration for anxiety, specifically performance anxiety, something that had affected me at other times. I believed in myself, or so I thought. Only later in the year, and in years to follow, did I come to appreciate the opportunity she was trying to give me in furthering my personal and professional development. She gave me the chance to believe I still had much to learn. Her lesson remains with me today and hopefully always, especially now that I have assumed the role of a supervisor, and a parent.

So when it comes to teaching our kids to believe in themselves, it appears the message should be altered somewhat. I want my kids to believe that through effort, persistence, and self-reflection, positive results can occur and satisfaction will result. But I also want them to understand that truly no one does it alone, and those that attempt to do so often find themselves repeatedly isolated, confused, and without a place to turn when they need help the most. I want them to know that initial discomfort can lead to much better things, if they are willing to discern the message that was sent. Ultimately, it seems that success is largely determined by an acute awareness that comes in knowing when to ask for help, when to forge ahead, and when to stop, reflect, and open oneself to an alternate course newly realized when me and we and they align.