

Encouraging Capability: How Being Curious Can Help

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

I recently attempted my first open water swim across Lake Mansfield. The day was stunning. Blue skies. Warm sun. Cool water. I was with a group. We had people supporting us in canoes and on paddleboards. I had spent the previous year becoming a stronger swimmer, refining my strokes and increasing my endurance.

But a few minutes into the swim, my breathing rate began to increase. I could feel anxiety, and even the tendrils of panic, begin to creep into my consciousness. I knew I was going to have to turn back.

The swim coach wanted me to succeed. He gave me advice. I floated on my back. I alternated strokes. I tried everything he suggested. All the assistance helped. But only briefly. I was overwhelmed and needed to head back to shore.

Ultimately, I knew I was going to need to try the open water swim again, without the pressure of lots of people around and without trying to do the whole swim at once. I needed time and space to process what I needed and to figure out what steps would work best for me.

A few weeks later, while driving with my family to my first triathlon, my six-year-old son was getting lots of “you should” advice as he got himself settled in the back seat. His sister and I kept offering suggestions, and it quickly became clear that we were merely overwhelming him.

Later I remembered how much more effective it can be to ask questions rather than telling someone what to do. In the Positive Discipline model, we ask “curiosity questions” in order to cultivate feelings of capability and to invite cooperation. The added benefit is that children are less likely to put up resistance or get flooded when their brains are processing questions rather than commands.

So when my son was getting upset about the arrangement of his possessions as we started our drive, I could have asked questions like:

“What’s happening?”

“What would you like to have happen?”

“How can I help?”

When we reached the site of the triathlon, I recalled my earlier open water swim attempt and thought about my son’s process of learning to navigate his feelings of frustration and anxiety. I looked around at the group of people setting up bikes, getting on wetsuits, and preparing to face a challenge. Once again the day was stunning. Blue skies. Warm sun. Cool water.

In that moment, it occurred to me that we all could benefit from curiosity questions. When the coach in the canoe had seen me stop swimming, what if he had asked, “What’s happening? What would you like to have happen? How can I help?”

Perhaps the outcome would have been the same, but I think my internal process would have been different. Maybe I would have considered my own needs and felt more empowered at a time when I was feeling pretty incapable.

We have an opportunity to help our children, and I daresay even the other adults in our lives, feel more confident and even connected. In those moments that we want to give advice and solve problems, what if we were to just become curious?

~ As director of education of the Montessori School of the Berkshires and mother of three, K. Meagan Ledendecker is curious about how to cultivate curiosity and capability in school, home, and workplace communities. www.berkshireremontessori.org

