

Session 1:

..... *The Courage to Encourage*

Prep

Welcome to your first session of Where Moms Connect: A Year of Encouragement. The main preparation instructions for the lessons are easy, and many are the same (lighting, music, prayer) for each session. You'll be encouraged to know that no other materials are needed for this first gathering!

- Read the entire lesson at least once (twice is better, though!) so you're comfortable with the content.
- Have soft music to play during discussion times, using a CD or MP3 player, and ensure that the lighting and temperature create a comfortable, inviting place for women.
- Take time to pray for the moms who will be joining you.

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Connecting Together

- Cheerfully welcome women to Where Moms Connect.
- Be sure to introduce yourself—even if you think everyone knows you. 😊
- Share any information moms might need to know, such as where restrooms are located, where the coffee is, and when you regularly meet.
- Invite those who may be sitting on the fringes to move to a table with others. Let women know there will be lots of conversation, so they'll need to be with at least two others so they can participate.

- If they don't already have one, let moms know how they can get a copy of *A Mom's Book of Encouragement*. Each mom needs her own copy.
- Ask all moms to introduce themselves to those at their tables, and allow about 2 minutes for those brief introductions.

Connecting the "En" to Courage

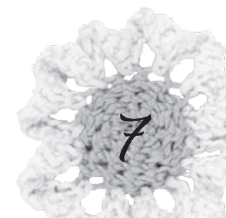
Take a moment, and think about a person who has encouraged you. What's the *best* encouragement you have ever received? Or...the best encouragement you can remember?

I can tell you the best encouragement I ever received was... (briefly share your story here so women get to know you better and get an idea of the kind of story they might share).

It's your turn now! Gather at your tables in groups of two or three, and share your story of the best encouragement you have ever received.

Allow about 5 minutes for conversation at tables. Give a 1-minute warning when moms need to start wrapping up; then after that minute, have them return their attention to you.

Our theme for this entire year at Where Moms Connect is "Encouragement." Today we're going to start our year of encouragement by talking about how we develop the courage to encourage.



Let's take a moment to think about what that means. The *courage* to *en-courage*.

That little prefix "e-n" is what transforms the word *courage* to *encourage*. It's those two letters that add the *action* to our courage. "En" means to "cause a person to be" or to "put into or provide something to someone." So to *encourage* is to provide and put courage into another person! As busy moms, we know we can use all the courage we can get!

Connecting to the Topic

Let's think about that person who encouraged you for a moment. Did it take courage for them to encourage you? Why? Why does it take courage to encourage someone else? Think about that for a moment. Pause for about 10 seconds. Why do you think it takes courage to encourage someone?

Allow time here for about five or six women to share their answers with the larger group. If you are using a microphone, repeat the answers these women share so all can hear.

Let's talk about some of the challenges we might face in giving encouragement. It takes courage to encourage because there's always a risk that the other person won't be able to receive what we say as encouragement. They might misunderstand us or simply refuse to hear positive and affirming words about themselves. (Hopefully none of us ever refuse to believe nice things others say about us 😊!)

Another challenge is that we feel inadequate about giving encouragement. We just aren't sure about the "right" words or the "right" time to say them.

It's also a challenge to actually have the right heart when we encourage. You may have been on the other end of this kind of "encouragement," when it's actually *advice* on topics like potty training or discipline.

There are two things that can affect our ability to have the courage to encourage: (1) thinking we have to give answers; (2) thinking we have none of the answers.

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Let moms know that these two points are printed for them on page 5 in *A Mom's Book of Encouragement* if they want to refer to them later. Remind moms that they'll be using these books every week, so they need to be sure they bring them along every time you gather.

This thinking can keep us from being encouraging to others. It can deflate our courage to encourage. Let's challenge this kind of thinking with an experiment.

Courage From the Inside Out

First, get into smaller groups of no more than four people. You might need to move around a bit to do that. Wait a moment while moms do this.

Now place your purse or bag on your lap. Wait a moment while moms do this.

Everyone ready? OK! There are two steps to this encouragement experiment. First, you will each take a turn sharing a current challenge in your life that you could really use some encouragement for. It could be about a feeling you are struggling with, like being overwhelmed or irritable or a situation with discipline or relationships in your family—whatever is on your heart today.

Next, the moms in your small group will search in their purses, pockets, and bags for an item to give to you, along with words of encouragement.

Let me give you an example. I share: *I could really use some encouragement because I feel like I'm irritable since I never have any time to myself. My friend Sarah searches in her purse and finds a package of mints and gives a few to me. She tells me I am doing a wonderful job and that I'm still sweet, even when I feel irritable. The mints can become a reminder of the refreshment I felt from the encouragement I received today, and I can also use them to take a short break with God to "cool off" the next time I feel irritable!*

Now it's your turn. I'll give you 5 minutes to share your needs—and be creative with your gifts and words of encouragement!

Allow women about 5 minutes to complete this activity, and give them a 1-minute warning before they need to turn their attention back to you.

Perfectly Prepared to Share

Let's hear about a few of the creative encouragements you received during our experiment. Allow four to five women to share briefly with the large group about the items and encouragement they received.

I appreciate that each of you was willing to open your purse in front of others—as well as open your hearts to each other. Even though we may have felt unprepared to give, we discovered we were perfectly prepared to share from whatever we had with us.

Perfectly prepared to share. As we gather here at Where Moms Connect for the upcoming months, we'll share

encouragement with one another. Let's remember we are always perfectly prepared to share. Through our experiment, we've discovered that we have everything we need in just what we bring with us, and we have the courage to put the "en" in *encouragement!*

Connecting With God

Let's talk about having the courage to encourage a little bit more, seeing what the Bible says on the topic.

Ask women to turn to page 5 in their *Mom's Book of Encouragement*. Here they will find several Bible verses and discussion questions. Tell moms they'll have 15 minutes to read and discuss the content that starts on this page with the other moms at their tables. (You may want to play music softly in the background during this discussion time.)

Give a 1-minute warning when moms need to start wrapping up; then after that minute, have them return their attention to you.

Better Together

We all know that encouragement doesn't happen in isolation; it happens when we connect to each other in a real way, in real life. The bottom line is, we need encouragement, and a key way to get it is from each other! Studies have even shown that we are better together—we live longer, have fewer illnesses, and are more likely to be content with our lives when we have affirming relationships.

And that's what encouragement is all about—affirming one another. It's about infusing, imparting, and providing courage to live happy, healthy, and fulfilling lives.

Connecting to My Life

Let's take a few minutes for you to reflect on what you have shared and experienced today. You'll find a blank space on page 7 of your book to write your thoughts, draw a picture, or capture any words you want to remember from today. I'll play music softly for about 2 minutes, and you can journal or use this time to pray or just receive encouragement from God.

Play instrumental music softly in the background for 2 full minutes. Then lower the volume and turn the music off, signaling that women should return their attention to you.

The notes you make in this book each week will become a great journal of the encouragement you'll receive over the next months we share together. There will be days in between our meetings when you may feel isolated and alone. Use this book to stay connected to the encouragement you received here and the people you shared with. Plus, additional devotional readings in the book can give you an extra boost of encouragement when you need it!

Closing

Let's close our time together by digging into our purses again—which also means digging into our real lives—and searching for an item that represents your greatest need at the moment. Perhaps it is a diaper—which could represent a lot of messy things! Or a pen, that represents your need for communication or encouraging words. Maybe it's a dollar or credit card that represents your need for financial provision. Take a moment to dig into your purse and find one thing that represents your need today.

Allow a minute for each woman to find an object. Then have everyone stand together, holding their objects in their hands.

As you hold this object in your hands, I'd like you to think of placing it before God as a symbol of your need today. Take a moment to pray silently, or just take a moment of silence, as you hold it before God and ask for his encouragement and strength. Allow time for a brief moment of silence.

I'd like to close with a Scripture and a short prayer. Psalm 138:2-3 says: "I praise your name for your unfailing love and faithfulness; for your promises are backed by all the honor of your name. As soon as I pray, you answer me; you encourage me by giving me strength."

Pray for the moms and all the objects they hold that represent their current need for encouragement from God. Thank God for his unfailing love and his promise to hear their prayers and meet their needs. Pray for the encouragement that has been imparted today to continue to bring each woman the strength, hope, and joy she needs in the week ahead. Pray that each woman would continue to grow in her courage and ability to put the "en"—the action—into the word *encourage*.

Thank women for coming, and let them know how much time those who have children in child care have before they need to collect their kids, or remind moms of any announcements that were made at the beginning of your time together.