

Motivating Children for School Success Joan Falcigno, School Psychologist

All parents want their children to experience success in school. This is accomplished when the student pays attention, demonstrates effort and develops the skills and knowledge that are deemed necessary for success through out their lives. But when a child is not motivated and does not value success, parents often become frustrated and discouraged because they do not know how to change their child's attitude and work ethic. There are many books and articles written on motivating the under-achiever. Many of them address the issue by helping parents understand the problem and, also, by attempting to help them remediate it.

This literature usually begins by describing the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is often described as our innate or inborn drive to do our best. This usually develops from the positive self-image and confidence that results from experiencing some level of success in our lives. Extrinsic motivation is the drive that develops from being rewarded by something or someone other than ourselves. For example, this might be the drive some elite athletes develop when an Olympic medal is in their reach, or when your child makes an exceptional effort to improve a grade on a report card because you've offered a monetary reward. This kind of motivation is often fleeting, and most authors discourage its use. These authors believe that children will naturally feel rewarded with a sense of mastery when they accomplish challenging tasks. This certainly is the ultimate goal when extrinsic motivation is used. For the parent of a child who is un-motivated, the extrinsic motivation strategies are useful and necessary when trying to "jump start" a child's enthusiasm for succeeding in school. These strategies should be used sparingly, and with caution, but they have worth.

Of course, there is no simple solution to a child's difficulty with motivation. A child's lack of motivation can result from a multitude of problems. Sometimes it stems from the child being overwhelmed and not knowing how to approach a task. Sometimes the child does not feel that his/her hard work is appreciated, and so, "Why try." Sometimes a lack of interest in the task at hand or a lack of confidence in himself/herself may cause a child to give up or not work to his/her potential. Whatever the reason, parents sometimes look to the school's staff for help. After perusing some articles written on the subject, I have compiled a list of recommended strategies for parents that can prevent or remediate the motivation problem.

- Speak positively about school related activities (tests, quizzes, homework, etc.) and discuss their worth. Avoid nagging and lecturing your child about school related problems.
- Set goals with your child that are attainable. For example, if your child gets 7 out of 12 math problems correct on the first math test, encourage him/her to get 8 out of 12 correct the next time.
- Celebrate your child's "Steps in the right direction." Acknowledge their effort and persistence in any endeavor (team sports, homework, etc.). Help them realize that the process is as important in their success as the outcome.

- Help them develop a routine and good work habits by encouraging them to develop a schedule for before and after school activities. For example, ask him/her to create scheduled times for snack, play time, television time, homework, and activities such as team practices/games, boy/girl scouts, etc. Set priorities and limit activities if there isn't enough time for them to accomplish everything by a reasonable bedtime.
- Help your child organize his homework and long-term projects so that they do not become overwhelming. Do this by breaking down the larger task into smaller manageable ones. Use a calendar to plan long-term projects and agree on some deadlines for the tasks,
- Help your child recognize that his hard work is paying off. Keep the work he/she has chosen as his/her best in a folder so that you can refer to it for progress through out the school year.

Most of all, spend individual time with your child. Help each child see that his/her hard work is appreciated by rewarding each of them with your praise and attention. You will be amazed at how much this strategy will pay off.