

FEBRUARY IS PSYCHOLOGY MONTH

"Just not motivated enough..." Enhancing motivation in your child

This article was prepared by TCDSB Psychology staff based on the latest scientific research in the fields of psychology and child development

Parents are often heard saying "My child is just not motivated enough to do well in school" or "My child isn't motivated to try new things" or "My child isn't motivated to do his household chores". It can be frustrating to see your child not completing homework, making excuses for not participating in an activity or arguing with you when it is time to take out the trash.

Researchers have made distinctions between internal motivation (when kids and teens do things simply because they want to do them), and external motivation (when kids and teens do things because adults tell them to). As adults, we engage in both internally and externally motivated activities, such as when we clean the house because we want to, or when we go grocery shopping because we have to. Likewise, although we hope that our kids will eventually develop strong internal motivation to try hard, do well in school, and try new things, we often need to help them to become motivated in certain areas.

Understanding what can get in the way of your child's motivation can help you assist your child in developing motivation.

Factors affecting motivation

What is important to adults is not necessarily important to kids and teens, such as having a clean bedroom, practicing piano, or getting bonus marks on an essay. Things that are not considered important to us are typically not internally motivating.

Schoolwork that is much too hard for a student can affect how that student sees him/herself, which then affects motivation to continue trying. If the student continually tries hard but meets little success, the student eventually gives up, saying: "What's the point of trying? I'm going to fail anyway."

During the adolescent years the impact of several factors on the young person can be overwhelming, which can also affect motivation. Biological changes during puberty can have effects on moods and attitudes. Transitions such as from elementary to high school, or from high school to post-secondary can be scary, and may affect students' academic motivation and motivation to try new things. Social relationships and peer pressures can also affect motivation.

When their intrinsic motivation for success is entirely replaced by external reward systems (like candy, money, or excessive praise), children learn to feel successful only if *someone else* rewards them for their accomplishments. In such situations, children may not develop feelings of self-worth, and will judge their own value by someone else's standards.

How can you enhance your child's motivation?

- Understand what is important and internally motivating for your child. Try to be involved in those aspects of your child's life, even if this only means expressing interest in a particular video game or who is wearing what kind of shoes at school. In this way, your child may be more motivated to be interested in what you consider to be important.

- Be a good role model. Let your child/teen see you learning new things in life, no matter how small. Let him/her see you putting forth your best effort, completing work to be done, and meeting obligations. Demonstrate that learning and being responsible are internally motivating for you.
- The family's view of the importance of education can affect the child's motivation to do well in school. Parents can communicate their view to their child by being involved in the child's school experience by going to parent-teacher conferences, attending open houses and concerts, and communicating with the child's teachers through telephone, the agenda book, or email.
- Let your child know that hard work takes time, but it pays off. Encourage your child to persist at tasks, even if they are difficult. Encourage independence and resist the natural urge to "help," or "fix it" right away.
- Hold realistic expectations of your child's achievements. When kids are asked to do the impossible, they may stop trying.
- Steer your child towards appropriately-challenging situations. Activities that are slightly difficult for the child will be more motivating and provide for stronger feelings of success when accomplished.
- Praise and rewards should be based upon children's effort and persistence, rather than on the actual accomplishment.