
I N S I G H T S

FOR FAMILIES



Student motivation



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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Why are some kids driven to do their best while other kids are easily satisfied with “good enough”? How do we get the “good enough” kids to work more and try harder?

It's tempting to think that kids are born with or raised to either have an internal need to strive or a temperament that allows them to be comfortable with mediocrity. If that were true, we could let go of the constant battle to motivate unwilling children. But research suggests that motivation is individual and changeable. The following tips are from the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching (<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/motivating-students/>).

The carrot or the stick: Extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation

Behavioral researchers have found student-driven motivation or rewards-based motivation has a more longer-lasting effect on children. They respond more positively to incentives than punishments.

Intrinsic motivation: Positive motivators are intrinsic – the carrot. They are the motivators that drive kids to want to do better, such as curiosity or natural interest.

“Intrinsic motivation can be long-lasting and self-sustaining. Efforts to build this kind of motivation are also typically efforts at promoting student learning. Such efforts often focus on the subject rather than rewards or punishments...On the other hand, efforts at fostering intrinsic motivation can be slow to affect behavior and can require special and lengthy preparation. Students are individuals, so a variety of approaches may be needed to motivate different students.

Extrinsic motivation: Negative motivators, or consequences of failure, are extrinsic – the stick. This could mean an actual consequence, such as a loss of privileges or failure to achieve a reward, such as a scholarship or application acceptance.

“Extrinsic motivators more readily produce behavior changes and typically involve relatively little effort or preparation...On the other hand, extrinsic motivators can often distract students from learning the subject at hand. It can be challenging to devise appropriate rewards and punishments for student behaviors. Often, one needs to escalate the rewards and punishments over time to maintain a certain effect level. Also, extrinsic motivators typically do not work over the long term. Once the rewards or punishments are removed, students lose their motivation.

Helping students build intrinsic motivation

Children have different levels of motivation based on different learning styles. Deep learners want to master a subject and are easily motivated;

(Over)

strategic learners are motivated by rewards and want to compete against others or achieve recognition; surface learners are motivated by a desire to avoid failure and do the minimum to avoid the risk of falling short. Knowing your child's motivational style is helpful in building intrinsic motivation.

Children must develop motivational skills for activities they want to do and for those they must do. Although ideal activities are those they choose themselves, sometimes they just need to do the things they are told to do.

To increase student interest in subject matter, help children find appealing areas of interest. These teacher tips can also help parents discuss school work with a reluctant child:

Novelty: I haven't seen anything like it.

Utility: This topic has important ideas you will use again later in the lesson.

Applicability: Notice how relevant this is to the topic?

Surprise: This lesson has many uses, and you haven't even seen them all.

Feedback: Read this to see if you really understood the previous lesson.

Closure: This is where you see what we've learned come together in a final lesson.

Strategies to motivate children

Become a role model for student interest. Let your child see you pursuing your interests. Show energy, enthusiasm and passion for your activities and interests.

Get to know your child's interests. Pay attention to what your child is telling you they are interested in. If they want to play bass in a rock band, they may be considerably less enthusiastic about concert piano lessons.

Use examples to make your point. If you make a decision about your child's activities, explain how and why it will help them expand their skills for their area of interest. This opportunity to learn to play piano will help them understand music theory and will help them be a better bass player. And all bands need keyboard players, too.

Use a variety of active learning activities. Encourage active learning that lets children work through a problem to discover the answer and lesson on their own. Allow collaboration if possible to build teamwork skills.

Set realistic goals. Be reasonable about how fast they should progress and how much time they should commit to. Encourage them to set their own goals. If the expectations are unreasonable, you risk a rebellion and loss of interest in the activity.

Be free with praise and constructive with criticism. Do not criticize the individual, but make comments that would help them improve. Be nonjudgmental and offer suggestions to improve.

Let students control their education. Allow your child to pursue their interests and take responsibility for the outcome. If they perform poorly, stress the connection between effort and outcome. Let them know that their achievement is within their control. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/motivating-students/>