



Motivating Kids with Learning and Attention Problems

- Steven is 11 and in the fifth grade. His reading problem causes him to read haltingly. On the day he knows he'll be asked to read out loud at school, he develops a stomach ache.
- Maria, age 9, is in the third grade. Her visual perception and fine motor problems interfere with her handwriting, so it takes her an hour to finish one worksheet at night, let alone two or three. The teacher asks her to write more legibly, but she's doing the best she can. She's losing interest in school.
- John is 10, is in the fourth grade, and has been diagnosed as having AD/HD. His schoolwork is fine — when he remembers to bring books home and to turn in his assignments. The teacher says he's "unmotivated."

The truth is that none of these children is "unmotivated." In fact, they're highly motivated — to avoid public humiliation or failure.

While most children with learning problems must work hard to do well in school, not all struggle emotionally. Why is one child motivated and another gives up before he tries?

What Dampens Motivation?

Much research has been done over the years on motivating children with learning disabilities (LD) or AD/HD. It tells us that the main reasons these children withdraw mentally from school is fear of failure, frustration with inconsistent performance (good one day, stumbling the next), lack of understanding the schoolwork, emotional problems, anger, or desire for attention — even negative attention.

The behavior that accompanies this dampened motivation may range from quitting ("school is boring"), avoiding any attempt ("I'm stupid; why try?"), clowning (for attention), denying ("I don't care about English"), being impulsive ("There! I'm done!"), or bullying (picking on someone smaller).

We also know that of the brain's various learning systems, if the emotional system is in turmoil, the cognitive system must expend energy on it before the brain can focus to learn. This means you must help your child talk about his feelings before you can figure out how to motivate him to do math or to write essays. Help him to see the pattern of his behavior and to understand why he doesn't feel motivated to succeed at school.

What Fires Motivation?

Babies are born with an inherent drive to learn. Your challenge as the parent of a child with learning or attention problems is to sustain that inner joy of learning for its own sake in the face of your child's struggles and frustrations. We call that kind of child "self-motivated."

Kids will be self-motivated to learn when they:

- Feel competent about something
- Have some choice and control over their learning
- Believe that intelligence isn't fixed at birth
- Feel loved and respected by their parents

Cultivate Competence

One way to build a sense of competence in your child is to encourage his passions. There's an academic payoff to building competence this way. "The good news may seem paradoxical: research has shown that the indirect strategy of helping your child enjoy learning and see its value is the best way to improve your child's grades and raise his test scores.

If your child has a particular strength in school, such as being a math whiz, find ways outside of school to expose him to math in the real world — computers, hands-on science museums, and math camps.

If he struggles with most school subjects, look elsewhere for his passions. Pay attention to whatever makes your child 'perk up'. Is it animals? Plants? Music? Art? Dinosaurs? Video games? Skateboards?

To play on these passions, help your child deepen his knowledge. For example, if your internet provider allows you space for a family website, let the child help build one on his favourite subject. He could research and write about the foremost skateboard athletes in the world. Post his drawings of himself skateboarding the galaxy. List unanswered questions about skateboards. Let family and friends interact with the website, too — what else would they like to know from your in-house skateboard expert?

Give Your Child a Choice

All of us thrive when we feel we're acting of our own volition. Children with learning and attention difficulties are no different. For example, when they are allowed to make choices about when to study and in what environment (such as on the floor, with music, etc.), they feel a sense of control over their own world. This leads to greater pride and self-motivation.

Dr. Mel Levine, author of the set of tapes called *Developing Minds*, says, "Help children develop a sense of control by presenting things they do not want to do as choices. For example, let a child decide whether to do homework before or after dinner. At school, consider letting a child who dislikes chorus participate in a school performance by selling tickets."

Raise a Persistent Child

There are experiments that reveal a child's beliefs about intelligence affect his motivation to succeed. If he believes intelligence is fixed at birth and he missed out,

he is liable to quit without trying. If, on the other hand, you help him to understand that persistence is more important than the luck of the draw, you promote a child who can learn to succeed on his own terms. This is the child who changes from saying, “What’s the use?” to “I’ve learned how to slow down and double-check my work.”

It is important to emphasize notions of ‘flexible intelligence’. Tell your child, in every way you can, that brainpower is something you acquire. Make the following sayings (or their age-appropriate equivalents) your family mantras:

- “Success is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration.”
- “Geniuses are made, not born.”

Love and Respect Your Child

Every child needs to feel that his parents are on his side. You can demonstrate your love and respect for your child with learning problems by accepting, connecting, and supporting, no matter what. You still love him, even when he forgets his assignment. You’re interested in the details of each day. And when he’s upset, you help him to give words to feelings.

Respect your child by helping him understand not only his specific learning difficulties, but strategies for coping in school. For example, if your child cannot hold multiplication facts in long-term memory, he may not do well on a standardized math test. He needs both a strategy to practice and a strategy to take the test. He may need different ways to drill multiplication, such as tactile manipulation of objects, drawing pictures, or saying the tables out loud. He may also need more time on the test.

Reward Learning, Not Performance

Our culture reveres inborn talent and luck. Unfortunately, that can leave out the child who struggles in school. He begins to believe that no matter how hard he works, school success is outside of his control.

But if your family stresses learning for its own sake, he can succeed. Then the effort of learning is valued as much as the outcome in school. Help your child learn to set attainable learning goals, such as studying a math concept from a variety of angles until he understands it. This might mean that you must be content with something like a C grade in Math — but an A+ in Effort.

It will be important to communicate regularly with your child’s teacher so all of you (parents, teacher, and child) can work as a united team. With the teacher’s help and ideas, your child’s learning goals will be supported both at school and at home.

You also want your child to learn that making mistakes is a natural part of the process of learning. Thomas Edison, said to have tried 10,000 times to perfect the light bulb, said, “I didn’t fail. I just discovered another way not to invent the electric light bulb.” Perhaps you and your child can create a certificate that proclaims:

Thomas Edison Award

This certifies that [name of child]
has mastered learning about [subject/interest]
by accomplishing multiple mistakes.

Congratulations!

Foster Long-term Motivation

Research tells us that honest praise is a powerful motivator for any child. This does not imply blanket praise, however. Dr Stipek says, “In an effort to ensure success we sometimes provide more help than children with learning problems or AD/HD actually need. This takes away from their own pride in accomplishment and the enthusiasm that a sense of achievement and competence can produce.”

Children with learning difficulties often have a marvelous ability to see the world in a new way. Celebrate each stumbling step your child takes on the way to learning and developing strengths, so that in the long run, he is motivated to love the process of learning itself.

About the Contributor(s)

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Other Resources

Books

Motivated Minds/Raising Children to Love Learning

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805063951/schwabfoundation

By Deborah Stipek and Kathy Seal

Raising Resilient Children

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0809297655/schwabfoundation

By Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein

Websites

All Kinds of Minds: website <http://www.allkindsofminds.org>

Raising Resilient Kids: website <http://www.raisingresilientkids.com>

Video

Mel Levine

Developing Minds/Feelings and Motivation — Individual Video (pdf)

www.pbs.org/wgbh/misunderstoodminds/PDFs/DM_parents.pdf

By Mel Levine