

DOTS for **MOTIVATION:**

The Gates' Program to Motivate Nonmotivated Students

--William R. Jenson, Deb Andrews, and Ken Reavis

They drive us crazy. Kids who are *capable* of doing academic work, but they *will not*. We blame them. They are called nonmotivated, passive, or lazy. *But are they really?* Most of these students have never been rewarded for academic performance in their early years. In fact, they may have been punished when they were learning too slowly; there were inattentive; or they simply could not keep up with the class. Calling them unmotivated or lazy is counterproductive. The majority of these students may feel stupid and are unsure of their capabilities. Often they pretend not to care, or that the academic work is beneath them. In reality, academic work for them is a chore and a stimulus for past punishing or humiliating experiences. It is sort of like a puppy who has had his nose repeatedly pushed in it, and hit with a newspaper. In the future, they are going to avoid newspapers no matter what you do.

Nonmotivated students are especially frustrating to teachers who use positive techniques and care about their progress. However, nothing seems to motivate them. There appears to be no effective positives, and they are immune to most punishers. Nonmotivation is one of the most commonly complained about problems by teachers.

Dr. Ginger Gates, a school psychologist in Houston, Texas, has developed an effective motivation program for many of these students. She had an extremely difficult, nonmotivated fifth grade boy who would do nothing. She remembered an adage from one of her education classes. "Watch what a child does and it will tell you what he likes." She watched. The student did nothing. She correctly surmised that he *was reinforced by doing nothing* and would probably *work to do nothing*. However, working for a free homework pass was too delayed and involved too much bookkeeping. She decided to use "dots."

The dots are the little dots used to mark folder files. They are colored, sticky on one side, and come in packages of 20. Ginger cut up the dots so that each one was separate. She also taped an envelope on the side of the student's desk to store the dots. She started with small steps. She would give him a dot when he was on-task and working. When he came to a problem he could not or did not want to do, he could use one of his dots which he stuck by the problem. This meant a free problem he did not have to do. Within a week, this student was completing more work than he had ever completed in three years. In essence, he was working more now to get out of work. Soon Ginger had to cut the

dots in half and finally into quarters because he was working so much.

There are several variations on this program. First, different colored dots can be used for different subjects. Second, two dots can be used for a test question. Third, the program can also be used with a *Mystery Motivator* (envelope with a reward inside). After you earn twenty-five dots, you also get a mystery motivator. Dots can be used as a shaping procedure for being on-task and working, and then expanded to the number of problems completed. For example, for the first couple of weeks, dots are given for being on-task and working, then about the third week, for problems the student completes (after every five problems you get a dot). Then it can be expanded to ten problems and so on. Dots can be given to teams in cooperative learning situations. Each team has a different color and *each* student has to do so many problems before the team gets a dot. Or, dots can be given on a larger scale. After you complete so many assignments, you get a dot that will get you out of a future assignment or test.

The pitfall of the program is that some students work until they get out of all of their work. Then you have to do what Ginger did and go to half dots and then quarter dots. Making students wait too long of a dot or doing too much work (particularly at first) kills this program and motivation. Ginger also warns secondary students know where to buy dots. If this happens, initial each dot when you give it.

The Gates Dot program is probably one of the most effective motivation interventions I have come across in years. It uses as a reward the very thing nonmotivated students want the most, to get out of work. It is also an excellent approach for reducing assignment size when a student's 504 agreement calls for a reduction in the amount of work given to a disabled students. In a sense, the student reduces his own assignment by working.

Thanks to Dr. Ginger Gates. She clearly deserves a "dot" for a creative intervention.

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