

How to Help Your Child Get Motivated in School

Strategies you can use to help kids work up to their potential

by Danielle Cohen <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-your-child-get-motivated-in-school/>

If you have a child who is struggling in school and doesn't seem to be motivated to make an effort, the first thing you want to do is explore whether there is some obstacle getting in his way. Learning issues, social challenges, attention or emotional problems can all cause kids to disengage academically.

But not all kids who are underperforming in school—clearly not living up to their potential—have a diagnosable problem. And there are a number of things parents can do to help motivate kids to try harder.

Get involved

As a parent, your presence in the academic life of your child is crucial to her commitment to work. Do homework with her, and let her know that you're available to answer questions. Get in the habit of asking her about what she learned in school, and generally engage her academically. By demonstrating your interest in your child's school life, you're showing her school can be exciting and interesting. This is especially effective with young kids who tend to be excited about whatever you're excited about. Teenagers can bristle if they feel you are asking too many questions, so make sure you are sharing the details of your day, too. A conversation is always better than an interrogation.

Likewise, it's important to stay involved but give older kids a little more space. If you're on top of your daughter all the time about homework, she may develop resistance and be less motivated to work—not to mention the strain it will put on your relationship.

Use reinforcement

Many parents are nervous about rewarding kids for good work, and it's true that tangible rewards can turn into a slippery slope. But there are ways to use extrinsic motivation that will eventually be internalized by your kid. "Kids respond really well to social reinforcers like praises, hugs, high fives, and those kinds of things," says Laura Phillips, PsyD, a neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Then they start to achieve because it feels good for them."

Ken Schuster, PsyD, a neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute encourages parents to use rewarding activities that would have probably occurred either way, but placing them after a set amount of time doing homework. He suggests treats that are easy to provide but that your child will enjoy, such as going for ice cream or sharing a candy bar. He also recommends breaking work up in chunks and using small breaks as rewards for getting through each chunk.

Reward effort rather than outcome

The message you want to send is that you respect hard work. Praising kids for following through when things get difficult, for making a sustained effort, for trying things they're not sure they can do successfully, can all help teach them the pleasure of pushing themselves. Praise for good grades that come easily can make kids feel they shouldn't have to exert themselves.

Help them see the big picture

For older kids who have developed an understanding of delayed gratification, sometimes simple reminders of their long-term goals can help push them. It can help many high school seniors who slack off after getting into college to remind them that they could lose their acceptance if their grades drop too much, or they might not be prepared for college courses. “Linking school up with their long-term goals can make the work feel more personally fulfilling,” explains Dr. Phillips.

Let them make mistakes

No one can get A’s on every test or perfect scores on every assignment. While kids need encouragement and it’s healthy to push them to try their best, know that setbacks are natural. Sometimes the only way kids learn how to properly prepare for school is by finding out what happens when they’re unprepared.

Get outside help

One way to take a little tension away from your relationship with your child is finding an older student (either at their school or a nearby college) to help him out with work. Most will charge pretty low rates, and the fact that they’re closer to your kid’s age may make it more likely he’ll listen to what they say.

“Homework was a source of conflict for us,” says Elizabeth, whose son Alex has ADHD. Elizabeth hired a few Barnard students to help Alex do his homework on certain nights, she recalls. “He behaved a lot better with them, and it was money well spent for me because I wasn’t fighting and I wasn’t stressed out.”

Make the teacher your ally

Another one of the most important things you can do for your child is to work with his teacher. The teacher might have additional insight about how to motivate your child, or what he might be struggling with. Likewise you can share any strategies or information that you have.

When her son was in lower school and only had one teacher, Elizabeth would call his teacher before the first day, introducing herself and alerting the teacher that her son had ADHD and that he found it hard to focus. She would give the teacher little tips that she had found were useful with Alex: Writing multi-step directions on the board, tapping him on the shoulder while walking past to make sure he was paying attention, and other small tweaks that would be useful to any young child but are especially essential to one with ADHD.

“Make sure that both school and home are of one accord,” stresses Kristin Carothers, PhD, a clinical psychologist. Dr. Carothers often sets up a system she calls the daily report card. With this system, the child gets points from his teacher for things like completing work and following directions the first time he gets them. Then he brings those points home, where his parents give him small rewards, such as extra time on the iPad or playing a game together.

Get support for yourself

It can be just as frustrating to watch your child withdraw from school as it can be difficult for the kid himself to focus. Elizabeth says that she often feels judged as a parent for having a son who struggles so much in school.

Some schools have support groups for parents of kids who are less motivated, and if your child's school doesn't, Elizabeth encourages setting one up. "It's very comforting to hear that you're not alone," she says. "It's also helpful to hear people who have gone ahead of you talk about how to navigate the school's system, find a therapist, and talk to teachers."

"If you're feeling yourself getting really angry or frustrated with your kids, take a step back," Dr. Carothers recommends. "Put things into context."

It's also important to keep your goals in perspective: Your child may not become a star student. Make sure to focus on the effort she puts in and commitment she shows instead of the outcome. If you expect perfect achievement from a child who struggles in school, you'll drive yourself crazy.

"I'm not trying to get my child to be someone he's not," Elizabeth says about her efforts to help her son. "I just want him to reach his potential."

How to Help Your Child Get Motivated In School Review Questions

- 1) Learning issues, social challenges, attention or emotional problems can all cause kids to _____ academically.
- 2) By demonstrating your interest in your child's school life, you are showing her school can be _____ and _____.
- 3) Parents are encouraged to use _____ activities that would have probably occurred either way, but place them after a set amount of time doing homework.
- 4) The message you want to send is that you _____ hard work.
- 5) Linking school up with their long-term _____ can make the work feel more personally fulfilling.
- 6) Sometimes the only way kids learn how to properly prepare for school is by finding out what happens when they're _____.
- 7) One way to take a little tension away from your relationship with your child is finding an _____ student to help him out with work.
- 8) The _____ might have additional insight about how to motivate your child, or what he might be struggling with.
- 9) It's important to keep your goals in _____.