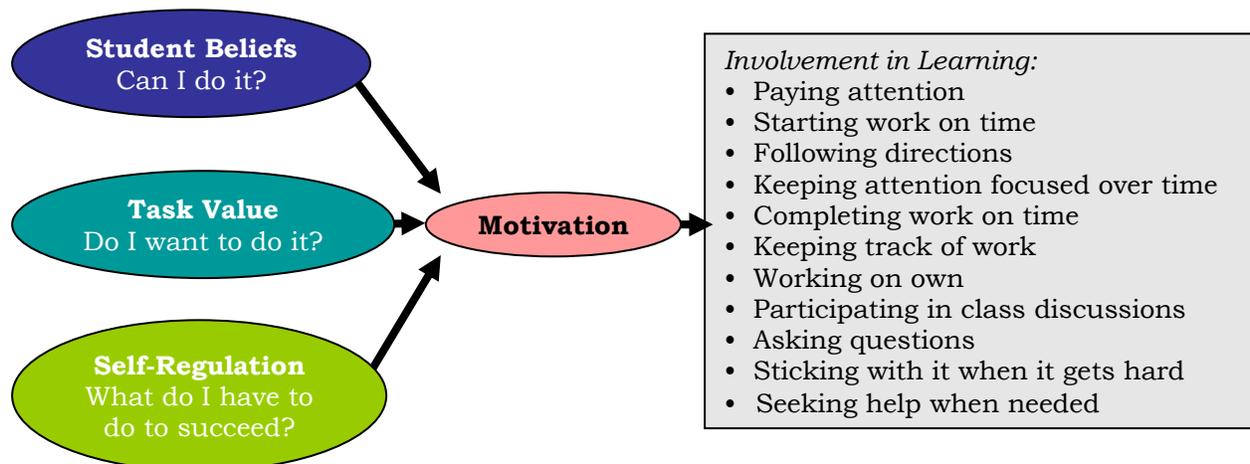


Motivation to Learn

In order to be successful in school and to learn, students must stay involved in the learning process. This requires students to do many different activities (see figure below). Why are some students motivated to do these things and others seem less motivated? This paper will discuss some of the important issues in understanding what motivates students to learn, and what you can do as a parent to increase your child's motivation to learn.

Understanding Motivation

Motivation is what “moves” people to act the way they do. As you would think, there are many reasons why people believe and act as they do. Ideas about what beliefs and behaviors are important in motivation to learn can be thought of as responses to three questions.¹



Can I do this task successfully?

This question relates to students' beliefs about their skills and abilities and whether the outcome will be positive if they try. Beliefs play an important role in how a student will respond when given a task. A student who believes he or she has the skills and abilities to successfully complete a task is likely to attempt it and stick with it, even if it becomes difficult. Also, a student who believes that the result will be positive if he or she tries is likely to attempt a task. These beliefs are influenced by the student's previous experiences of success or failure, as well as the type and difficulty of the assigned task.

Students who do not believe they can do a task successfully will say things like: “I am dumb.” “I can't do this.” “Why should I try, I will still get a bad grade.”

Anxiety is a source of motivational problems for some students. Anxiety can result from negative thoughts about their ability to do tasks and the likelihood they will do poorly, especially in situations where they are evaluated.

Worrying is an important aspect of anxiety, because it can interfere with thinking and attention skills.

Do I want to do this task and why?

Another important aspect of motivation relates to whether the student wants to do the task and why. The student may believe that he or she has the skills and abilities to do a task. They may also believe that if they put the effort into it, the results would be positive; however, he or she still may not *want* to do the task. Students make decisions about whether to do a task based on its value to them. There are three motivational aspects to the value of tasks.

Some tasks have an *internal value* to the student. For example, the subject or task may be stimulating and enjoyable to the student; or the student may get personal pleasure from doing well on the task.

Internal Motivators

- Feelings of “I can do it”
- Enjoyment of specific movements
- Being absorbed in the activity
- Feelings of success

External Motivators

- Promotion of important goals
- Pleasing others
- Being with others
- Rewards

Tasks can also have *external value* to a student, even if he or she is not internally interested. For example, doing well on the task may be related to current and future goals which are important to the student, such as getting good grades, getting into a school, or

career goals.

A third factor related to the value of a task is the *cost* to the student. Some tasks have negative aspects to them, such as producing anxiety from fear of failure. Other tasks may be perceived as requiring too much effort to do well. Other students may feel like it is more valuable for them to do something else, such as going to a friend’s house rather than studying for a test.

What do I have to do to succeed at this task?

The first two questions are related to students’ beliefs that can motivate them in their decision to start a task. This question, however, relates to what students need to do in order to successfully complete the task once they have decided to do it. In order to do well in school, students will need to do several things like these.

- Set appropriate goals
- Keep attention focused over time
- Stay organized
- Use effective study skills
- Control emotions of anxiety and frustration during tasks
- Know when it is time to seek help if tasks get difficult
- Evaluate how they are doing
- React to how they are doing by adjusting their behavior and strategies

Students will need to use specific skills and methods to do these things.

Ideas to Increase Motivation to Learn

There are a variety of things you can do to increase your child's motivation to learn. You can choose strategies based on the area of motivation your child may be having problems in.

You Can Do It! Building Confidence to Learn

- ☐ **Provide various activities and experiences in the home.** Trying a variety of different things will allow children to develop their interests and build their skills. These positive experiences can build confidence, reduce anxiety, and motivate them to try similar activities. Examples of activities you can expose your child to are listed in the box at the right.

- Individual and group sports
- Singing
- Dancing
- Playing a musical instrument
- Building a collection
- Doing a hobby
- Fixing things
- Building things
- Joining a club
- Games and puzzles
- Reading a variety of things

- ☐ **Make a connection between skill, effort, and performance.** You want your children to believe that they have control over their learning. If they develop their skills and put forth effort, they can be more successful in their learning. Frequent comments like these can help make this connection:

“You can do it. If you use your study skills and don't give up, you will get it!”

“If you check your math work you will get more problems correct.”

- ☐ **Help your child focus on their own progress rather than how they are doing compared to others.** Students with a history of poor school performance tend to have low hope of success. Other students only do what is necessary to get the grade. For these students, you will need to help them change their definition of success. In these cases, grades or how your child is doing compared to others should not be used to judge success. Instead, the focus should be on individual effort, skills, and progress. You want to communicate that mistakes will happen, and that they are okay. What is important is that he or she tries, sticks with it, and makes his or her own individual progress. Communicate your belief that if he or she tries and uses good study skills, they will improve.

- ☐ **Monitor your child's school and homework and provide immediate feedback.** Make it clear to your child what caused the result. When he or she is successful at a task, let them know that it was because of their abilities. This will build their confidence.

“You are so smart!”

“You are good at math!”

“You are a great writer!”

If your child has low confidence in his or her learning abilities, you have to be careful how you respond to their failures. You do not want to make them feel that their worth as a person depends on their performance. It is

important to help your child see that their poor performance is related to the methods they used or effort rather than their ability to learn.

“You got a low grade on your science test because you did not study for several days before the test.”

- **Provide specific strategies to improve performance.** In addition to providing lots of encouragement and feedback to your child, you will need to help your child develop his or her learning skills by teaching specific strategies to improve performance. This can include training in how to plan, set goals, stay organized, and use effective study skills.

Children with low skill levels may need to have their work modified so that the tasks they are given are appropriate for their skill level. This will allow them to experience success. They may also require individual attention, such as tutoring.

Here is Why! Increasing the Value of Learning

- **Provide emotional support.** The emotional support given by parents and teachers provides the setting for a child to stay connected to learning. All students need an adult to show them that they care and are interested in them, especially students who seem to have given up. This involves many of the strategies discussed in this paper. Parents should try to keep conflict, criticism, and punishment around school to a minimum. A negative relationship will work against what you are trying to accomplish in the long run. You want your child to approach new challenges with confidence in their abilities, to have a feeling that they have control over their learning, and to be proud of their accomplishments. These goals are accomplished through being supportive and encouraging over time. When problems arise, your job should be to better understand the problem and help come up with solutions.
- **Communicate high expectations and beliefs about your child.** One simple but important way to communicate that school and learning are important is to show interest in how your child is doing at school. Every school day, ask him or her about their school day, homework, tests, and classroom participation.

What you say to your child plays a big part in what they will believe about their school, learning and work. You want to communicate the following:

- I expect you to do the work.
- I expect you to do as well as you can.
- I know you can do it if you try and use good study skills.
- I expect you to stick with it, even if it gets difficult.

Encouragement and praise are clear ways of expressing these expectations.

“I know that assignment is tough, hang in there. I know you can do it!”

“When it is time to study, work hard!”

“Great job, you worked really hard on that paper!”

There are many more subtle ways to communicate your expectations. For example, you can ask your child “How many days before the test are you

going to study?” This question sends the message that you expect them to study several nights before the test.

- **Help your child see the value of what is being learned.** A common comment students make is “Why do I have to know this stuff?” Discuss with your child how basic knowledge like reading, writing and math, as well as more specific knowledge like science and history, is important for him or her to learn. You can relate what he or she is learning now with how that knowledge can be helpful in some practical, real-life situation. You can also relate what he or she is learning with some goal that is important to them, such as getting a certain type of job or doing a certain activity well.
- **Help your child set goals.** Goals can be a powerful way of changing behavior. Progress toward and accomplishment of goals can be a source of satisfaction, which can be a motivator. You can help your child set both short-term and long-term goals. You can also connect your child’s effort and performance to these goals.

The most motivating goals are short term, specific, and somewhat challenging. Goals with these qualities can increase students’ beliefs in their abilities (“I can do it.”) and improve performance.

Motivating Goals

- Short-term
- Specific
- Somewhat challenging

Goals that are *short-term* or close in time are more powerful than goals that are more distant in time.

This is mostly true for young students who tend to not think as much about things that are farther off. For example, the goal of improving a math grade on the report card may be too far away. Since report cards only come out every nine weeks, improving a report card grade may not motivate a student to do his or her math problems in class on a certain day. A short-term goal, such as “completing math work in class today,” may be more effective. It is easier to judge the progress of short-term goals than long-term goals.

Goals that are *specific* are more powerful than general goals, such as “do your best.” The best goals include specific performance standards. For example, “Complete at least 80 percent of your math problems.” Specific goals help students decide how much effort is needed to meet the goal. Also, it is easy to know when the goal is met.

Goals that are *somewhat challenging* provide more motivation. Students will put forth more effort on harder tasks. The goal should be difficult enough that the student will need to put forth some effort to reach it, but not so difficult that the student will not think they can’t reach it.

While short-term goals are powerful motivators, having some long-term goals and keeping them in mind can help keep students motivated in school over the long run. They help students keep in mind why they need to learn and do well in school. Below are some recommendations to help your child set some long-term goals.

- *Help your child think about a career.* Talk with your child about what type of work they would like to do for a living. You can discuss their interests and the jobs that relate to those interests. You also can talk about the type of education needed to get different types of jobs. You can

help him or her see how the effort they put into their school work now is related to the career choices they will have later.

- *Help your child plan for college.* Talk with your child about going to college. Help them learn about different colleges and the kinds of grades needed to get into them. Frequently remind your child how grades and learning in school now will affect their ability to go to the college of their choice.

It also can be helpful to have your child set some goals that are in-between short- and long-term goals. A good time to do this is at the beginning of the school year. Your child can set goals related to grades and performance, such as getting a certain grade point average, participating more in class, or staying more organized. Have him or her write these goals down so that they can check their progress throughout the year.

- **Encourage healthy peer relationships.** Children tend to hang out with other children who like to do the same activities and have the same motivation toward learning and school. Because of this, you should keep an eye on who your child is hanging out with. Help your child become involved in groups that share your values. You can also encourage your child to do learning tasks with others. Working with others can be more fun and interesting than working alone. This can include forming study groups or participating in educational clubs at school (for example, math or geography clubs).
- **Use rewards when internal motivation is low.** Rewards can be important to use when natural, internal motivation is low. They can be used for achieving short-term goals. Rewards can be used by teachers in the classroom and by parents at home. A behavior chart provides an easy way to keep track of daily progress toward rewards. You should not use rewards when your child is already motivated to do a learning activity. In this case, adding rewards just increases the pressure to do what the child is already interested in doing, which can reduce their internal motivation.

Here is What You Do! Helping Students Reach Their Learning Goals

Below are some ideas you can use to help your child successfully complete a task once they have decided to do it. Finishing a task well will require students to control their behavior and use specific learning strategies.

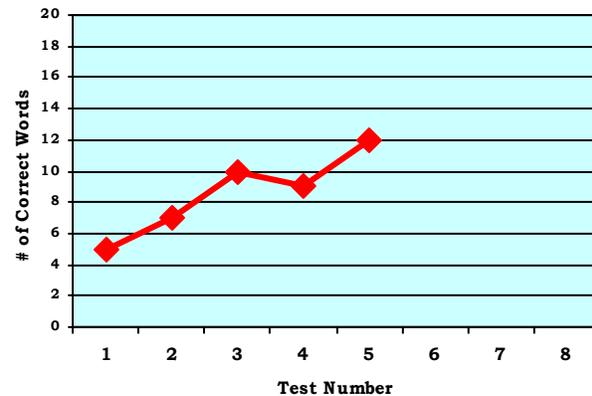
- **Increase skill level.** For students with below-average skills, it will be important to work toward increasing their skill level. This can be done through individual tutoring or taking part in remedial instruction at school. As the student begins to see progress in skills, he or she is more likely to take responsibility for success and be motivated by the feelings of success that comes from learning.
- **Teach specific learning strategies.** It may not be enough for a student to just believe that he or she can do it. They may need to learn specific study methods to be most successful. There are effective plans and methods for reading textbooks, studying for tests, staying organized, and managing time. Students need to be taught how to use good study skills. At first, you will need to work closely with your child, showing them how to use the skills.

Since the skills will require effort and discipline, you will need to closely supervise their study time and encourage them to use the skills. Your child will need to practice the skills until they become a regular part of their routine. The process of mastering the study skills and using them regularly may take most of the school year. As they use the study skills, they should begin to see improvement in their work. When improvement is seen, talk with them about how their use of the study skills was related to their good performance.

☐ **Keep track of progress.**

Keeping track of progress is an important part of goal setting. Progress can be recorded on a graph such as the one at the right.ⁱⁱ Graphs like this can be used for individual subjects or across subject areas. Seeing this improvement over time and relating it to the skills used will help the student believe in their abilities and take responsibility for success.

Spelling Progress



☐ **Teach your child how to seek**

help when tasks get difficult. In most tasks, students need to try to do the work on their own. However, there are times when students need help. Knowing when help is needed is an important part of a student taking control of their learning. Teach your child how to properly seek help by using the following steps.

- First, the student needs to try to solve the problem without help.
- Once he or she has decided that they don't understand how to complete the problem, they need to figure out whom to ask. This can be a parent, a fellow student, or a teacher.
- Before seeking help, the student should develop a good question to ask the helper.

Students who are timid will need lots of encouragement to seek help. Help seeking is good for motivation because it keeps students engaged in a task when it gets difficult.

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ⁱ Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., & Schiefele, U. (1998). Motivation to succeed. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (pp. 1017-1095). New York: Wiley & Sons.

ⁱⁱ Fulk, B. M. & Montgomery-Grymes, D. J. (1994). Strategies to improve student motivation. *Intervention in school and clinic*, 30 (1), 28-33.