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Motivation -- Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence

How can I keep my child motivated to learn and do well, both in and out of school?

Psychologist Carol Dweck defines motivation as "the love of learning, the love of challenge." And, according to her, motivation is often more important than initial ability in determining our success.

Yet somewhere in the middle grades the motivation of some young adolescents for learning takes a nosedive. A young teen may begin to grumble about assignments and teachers, ask to drop out of a favorite activity, complain that he's bored or show signs of being lost in the educational shuffle.

Here are some the things that can contribute to low motivation:

- **Biological changes.** The onset of puberty—getting her period or being 4 feet 2 inches tall when your buddy is 5 feet 10 inches—distracts some teens. Distractions make it hard to think about the swim team or the social studies project that's due.
- **Emotional concerns.** It may take extra effort to concentrate on a science project when she is preoccupied with physical insecurities or concerned about being excluded from a special group.
- **The school environment.** A young teen may lose motivation after moving from elementary school to a middle school or junior high. The loss of motivation can be fueled by insufficient support in the new school or by an increased workload and expectations to which the student hasn't yet adjusted.
- **Social and peer pressures.** A child may be influenced by friends who believe that academic success isn't "cool," or that girls aren't good at math.
- **A shift in how your child views his ability.** Younger children tend to believe that the harder you try, the smarter you'll get. But Dr. Dweck notes that as children move into their early teens, they may begin to believe that ability is fixed and to compare their ability with that of others—the harder you *have* to try, the less able you *must* be. This view can dampen motivation. Why try hard if it won't help you to do well?
- **Lack of opportunities.** Some youngsters lack opportunities to take the classes or participate in the activities that they need to spark their enthusiasm. This is most likely with students from disadvantaged families or who are at risk, contributing to perceptions that they are unmotivated.
- **Short attention spans.** Some educators report that it's hard to get students to focus on a long history project when they're used to TV programs and media presentations that are fast, short and entertaining.

- **Undeveloped work ethic.** Some unmotivated youngsters may not have learned that school success takes time and effort. Many attractions compete for students' attention and, according to some research, some students expect school and activities to be consistently exciting. They aren't aware of the fact that both in school and daily life, they can learn valuable lessons from activities that aren't always fun and that achievement usually requires real effort. You can encourage and provide opportunities for your child, but ultimately your son is responsible for seeing that his homework gets done and your daughter must be the one to practice the piano.

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Here are ways to encourage your child's motivation:

- **Be a good role model.** Young teens benefit from seeing their parents putting forth their best effort, completing work and meeting obligations. Parents need to demonstrate that they value learning and hard work.
- **Let your child know that sustained effort over time is the key to achievement.** Teach him to set high goals and to work hard to achieve them. Help him to see the value of tackling challenges and of finding ways to meet or exceed those challenges.
- **Steer your child toward appropriate classes and suitable activities.** Young teens need opportunities to excel and be useful. Success can be a powerful motivator and boredom may be a sign that your child hasn't enough opportunities to develop her talents. She may need an advanced English class, an art class or the chance to volunteer at a homeless shelter.
- **Offer support.** Insincere praise or praise for poor efforts is no help, but young teens need to be reassured that they can do something. "Sometimes kids will say they are bored, but it's because they haven't done [an activity] before," advises teacher Barbara Braithwaite. Your child may need hints about how to get started with a new project from you, another adult, an instructor or a book.
- **Find strengths and build on them.** Every child can shine in some area. Identify what your child does best, no matter what it is.
- **Communicate with your child's teachers, counselors or school principal when necessary.** A drop in grades is not uncommon when students go from one grade level to another. But if your child's grade drop is extreme or if it persists for more than one marking period, get in touch with someone at the school. It's OK to be a strong but respectful advocate for your child. Because middle-grades teachers may have very full schedules, you may need to show persistence. Call, write or e-mail teachers if you think that many assignments are inappropriate or if your child is unable to complete them successfully. Take the lead if your child is placed in classes that you think are poor in content or that fail to provide your child with sufficient stimulation.
- **Hold realistic expectations.** It's important to hold children to high standards. But when young teens are asked to do the impossible, they may stop trying. Don't pressure your 5-foot 4-inch son to try out for center on his basketball team just because he played center for his elementary school team. Instead, reassure him that, in time, he'll grow taller and help him to look for other activities in the meantime. Holding realistic expectations also requires that you consider your child's personality and temperament. Your 6-foot son may not enjoy playing basketball. Make sure that your child knows, deep in his heart, that you love him for what he is and not for what he **does**.



- **Be patient.** Children's motivation generally improves when parents take the steps discussed. However, patience may be required: Many young teens need the gift of time to develop the maturity that allows them to complete homework assignments and chores with a minimum of supervision.

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Last Modified: 09/11/2003