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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 19

Motivating Students to Learn

By Dr Andrew Martin and Dr Danielle Tracey*

“He doesn’t pay attention in class”
“She just doesn’t seem to care about school”
“The trouble is he is lazy”
“She just isn’t interested in school”
“He just doesn’t try at all”

Many parents and teachers have either heard, or indeed used, such words to describe their children and/or their students. Parents and teachers may feel frustrated and helpless when their child or student appears to lack interest in schoolwork.

A concern for many parents and teachers is how to motivate students to learn. This may become particularly relevant for older students, students who have difficulty learning or those who have experienced repeated failure.

It is important to recognise that a student’s lack of engagement and interest in school may actually be the result of a learning difficulty. To best help these students it is essential that the underlying learning difficulty be addressed rather than simply applying strategies to increase motivation.

This is not to say that motivation is not important for these students – their learning difficulty and motivation may both need attention. For this to happen, parents and teachers need to understand motivation and develop some simple strategies that can be readily applied both at home and at school.

What is motivation and why is it important?

A motivated student is one who has the energy and drive to learn, work effectively and achieve at school.

Motivation plays a key role in a student’s interest, engagement and enjoyment in school and associated tasks such as homework and study. Motivation also underpins a student’s achievement. As they move through their school years, very few students can succeed on sheer talent alone. Success also takes drive and commitment.

When students are motivated they tend to get better marks at school, work more effectively on difficult schoolwork, make the most of their abilities, behave well and enjoy school.

On the other hand, if a student is not motivated to learn, they may become disruptive, apply minimal effort and as a result are more likely to perform poorly. In more extreme cases a lack of interest and achievement may lead to truancy and dropping out of school. Moreover, the journey through school may not be a particularly happy one.

Understanding Motivation

There are a number of thoughts and behaviours or **Boosters** that motivate students and enhance their achievement. There are also a number of thoughts and behaviours or **Guzzlers** that reduce motivation and achievement. These are presented in the diagram below.

Students improve their motivation by increasing their Booster thoughts and behaviours and reducing their Guzzler thoughts and behaviours.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

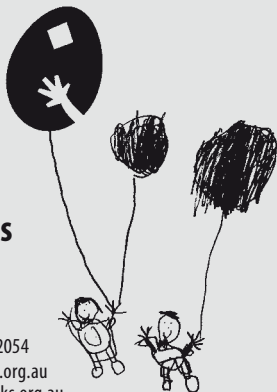
Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.



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Boosters: What are they and how can parents and teachers help increase them?

Self-Belief

Students need to be confident in their ability to do well in their schoolwork.

Many students believe they are unable to succeed. It is important for parents and teachers to challenge such thinking. For example if a student says "I'm hopeless, I'm going to fail this geography test", a parent may respond by asking, "Is that really true? Did you fail your last geography test?" or "What do you think you can do to increase your chances of success on the test?"

Parents and teachers can also help re-define what success means and focus on a student's personal best. For example when a student receives their spelling mark, instead of drawing comparisons with other students' marks, they could compare it to their own previous mark in spelling.

Value of Schooling

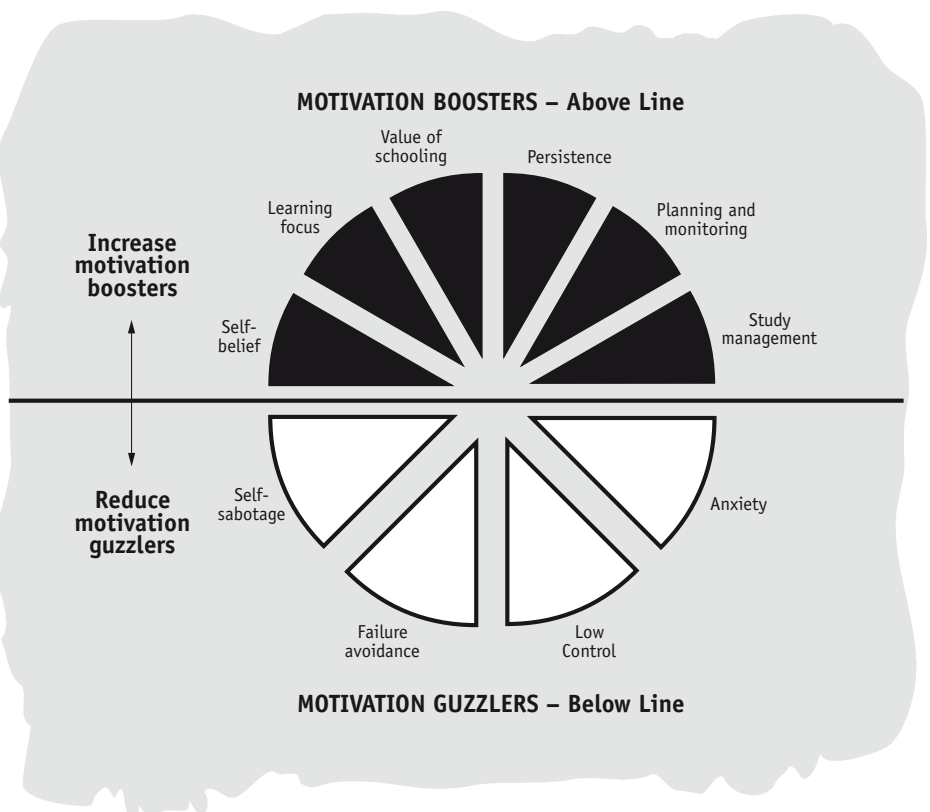
Students are more motivated when they believe that what they learn at school is useful, important and relevant to them or the world in general. At times it may be difficult to make such links. Many parents can probably remember when they were at school asking, "How is algebra going to help me in real life?"

To give meaning to school and school subjects, parents and teachers can talk about the many links between school and world events or the student's life, interests and future career. They can also discuss the skills they learn at school such as social skills, thinking skills and decision-making skills that can help them in other parts of their life.

Learning Focus

Motivated students are focused on learning, solving problems and developing their skills. Teachers and parents assist students' learning focus by fostering an interest in skill development, learning new things, solving problems or completing a task for the satisfaction of mastery. This requires less emphasis on comparisons with other students. The less students are focused on others around them, the more focused they are on the task at hand.

Nicole is a Year 10 student who sees learning as a means to develop her skills. *"If I can grasp something by stretching my mind or working really hard on something then I've made progression in myself and I'm proud of myself more than being able to do something better than someone else."*



Persistence

A motivated student is also able to keep working on his or her schoolwork even when that work is difficult or challenging – they are persistent.

One way parents and teachers can enhance children's persistence is by breaking the task into smaller parts. This is called 'chunking'.

For example, completing an assignment can be daunting for many students and they may simply give up or do the fastest job possible. Parents and teachers can help these students by showing them how to break the task down into several steps such as understanding the question, defining key words, gathering books, reading and taking notes, developing an essay plan and so on.

Another way parents and teachers can enhance students' persistence is by drawing on previous challenges they have faced and examining exactly how these challenges were overcome and can be used to help them now. What were they *thinking* when they 'hit the wall' last time? What did they *do* when they 'hit the wall' last time? What lessons can be taken from this to get over, under or around the wall this time?

Finally, the goals set by students can increase their persistence.

Goals have the potential to provide clear direction and are an action plan when the going gets tough or the student loses his or her way. Most importantly, goals must be effective to boost students' persistence.

Effective goals are achievable, believable, clear and desirable. If students set a goal they cannot possibly achieve, they will probably not be persistent when they encounter difficulty. Instead, they are likely to see it as too hard and give up. Challenging goals are fine, but they must be at a level of challenge that is achievable to the student.

Planning and Monitoring

Motivated students tend to plan their assignments and schoolwork or study. They also keep track of their progress as they do their work.

Books & Websites for further information

Books

For Parents

Barton, S., & Ingram, K. (2001). *Build your teenager's self-esteem ... and enjoy being a parent again*. Victoria: Anne O'Donovan.

Cholden, H., Friedman, J., & Tiersky, E. (1998). *The homework handbook: Practical advice you can use tonight to help your child succeed tomorrow*. Chicago: Contemporary Books.

Faber, R., & Meed, J. (1995). *How to talk so kids can learn at home and in school*. Simon & Schuster Fireside Books.

Irvine, J. (2000). *Thriving at school: A practical guide to help your child enjoy the crucial school years*. Sydney: Simon & Schuster.

Seligman, M.E.P. (1995). *The optimistic child: A revolutionary approach for raising resilient children*. Sydney: Random House.

For Teachers

Covington, M.V. (1998). *The will to learn: A guide for motivating young people*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Killen, R. (1998). *Effective teaching strategies*. Katoomba: Social Science Press.

McInerney, D. (2000). *Helping kids achieve their best*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Raffini, J. (1996). *150 ways to increase intrinsic motivation in the classroom*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Websites

www.ajmartinresearch.com

(numerous papers on student motivation by Dr Martin)

www.studyskills.soton.ac.uk

www.dse.nsw.edu.au/gotoschool/studying

The example of chunking described above is also a good strategy students can use to plan their schoolwork. Developing a plan also assists their ability to monitor their progress as they do that work.

Parents and teachers can show students how to check their schoolwork by encouraging checking strategies such as re-reading the question before jumping in and answering it.

Dean, a Year 11 student, shows his planning and monitoring skills. *"I try to be pretty organised. For an essay I'll do all the reading and I'll try and take notes for the readings and I'll have an essay plan and have a general outline of where I'm going and where the essay's going. I'm always making sure that it's on track by looking back at the question."*

Study Management

Motivated students utilise their study time well, organise an effective study timetable and choose and arrange where they study so that they are most able to concentrate and work effectively.

Chaos in students' study or homework environment can reduce their motivation to complete work. There are lots of good books that show students how to develop an effective study timetable, manage time more effectively and prioritise their work.



Guzzlers: What are they and how can parents and teachers help reduce them?

Anxiety

Anxiety refers to the worrying thoughts students have about school and the nervous feeling they get when they think about school.

A very low level of anxiety is not necessarily a bad thing and is probably to be expected in our competitive school system. For some students, however, anxiety can escalate to excessive levels and this can reduce their ability to concentrate, pay attention and remember things.

Simon describes what this is like. *“If I study and think I know everything, when I get in there, I think, ‘Oh, I didn’t look at this and I didn’t look at this either’. I freeze up.”*

Parents and teachers can help reduce students’ anxiety by showing them some effective relaxation techniques such as meditation or encouraging exercise such as swimming, jogging or walking. They can also teach them some test-taking skills such as doing practice tests, reading instructions carefully, understanding test questions better, staying on track when answering questions, checking answers and sketching essay plans quickly.

Low Control

Motivation is reduced when students are unsure about how to do well or how to avoid doing poorly.

This uncertainty can be reduced in class by providing clear objectives and expectations, giving choices over topics that students can complete and giving clear task-based feedback to students about their performance and how to improve next time.

It also requires students to focus on the controllable factors in their study life. The two most important ones are effort (how much work they do) and strategy (how they do that work). When they see these are the primary reasons for their marks at school, they have a greater sense of control over their studies.

It is also important to reduce their focus on uncontrollable factors such as good or bad luck, getting an easy test or hard test or the teacher liking or disliking them.

Failure Avoidance

Students lack motivation when they are simply completing their schoolwork to avoid doing poorly, disappointing parents or teachers or being seen as ‘dumb’. These students are motivated by their fear of failure.

There are two main ways to deal with a fear of failure.

First, they need to see that mistakes are important information about how to improve next time and do not mean they are hopeless, useless or that there’s no point trying again. By taking the sting out of failures, students do not live in fear of them. This does not mean students should not care about mistakes. They should care – but care in the sense that failure can be the launch pad to future success.

The second way to reduce a fear of failure is to reduce the link between achievement and a student’s worth as a person. When students only feel OK when they achieve, it drastically raises the stakes of every test, assignment and exam. Thus the maths test is not only a test of their maths but also a test of their worth. Is it any reason they fear failure when failure can mean they fail as a person?

As parents and teachers we must clearly communicate to students that their worth as a person is a given and must not be confused with their achievement. This does not mean they can’t be disappointed if they don’t do so well – but be disappointed in their lack of study or effort, not disappointed in themselves as a person.

Self-Sabotage

Students who lack motivation may do things that seem to undermine their success at school.

They may put off doing their homework or assignment, waste time when they are meant to be studying, not study at all or clown around in class. Why do they do this?

The main reason is so they have an alibi in case they don’t do so well. They are therefore able to shift the cause of the poor performance away from their possible lack of ability (one of students’ highest priorities is to protect their ability) and onto a ‘safer’ cause such as procrastination.

The reason why students self-sabotage is because they fear failure. To address this, students need to view mistakes as diagnostic information for future improvement and the link between their worth as a person and their achievement needs to be reduced.

Conclusion

Parents experience frustration when their child does not complete homework or study, or performs below their ability. Teachers also experience frustration with a student who does not want to complete work in class, underachieves or becomes disruptive.

Increasing students’ motivation is linked to changing problematic behaviour and increasing positive thoughts. Although the set of strategies presented above is by no means exhaustive, it does provide a starting point for parents and teachers to gain greater insight into their students’ motivation and increase helpful and positive thoughts.

When we understand the thoughts and behaviours underpinning motivation, we are better equipped to make children’s learning more rewarding and enjoyable.

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School Age Services
– contact your local branch

Family Services
– contact your local branch

All other enquiries
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