

Academic Motivation: Strategies for Parents

Dear Parents:

A child with positive academic motivation has a desire to learn, likes learning-related activities and believes that school is important. Positive academic motivation not only helps a child succeed in school, but also helps the child to see that learning is rewarding and important in all aspects of life—school, work and community. The following are some tips from the National Association of School Psychologists to develop and foster motivation in your child.

Developing Academic Motivation

Natural motivation. Children are naturally motivated to learn from the time they are born. The early signs of motivation to learn can be seen in a baby's struggle to reach a toy, learn to walk, or eat without help. Children whose learning and discovery is encouraged when they are infants and preschoolers will approach school-related learning as challenging, interesting, and rewarding. Children with positive academic motivation believe that they can be successful if they try hard, work in order to master the material, and are motivated to improve their performance rather than just do better than other children.

Negative beliefs about learning. Sometimes something gets in the way of a child's natural motivation. The child may believe that he or she cannot do well in school-related tasks and stops trying or does not try hard enough because he or she does not think it will make a difference. The child becomes easily frustrated and gives up when learning is difficult. When the child gives-up, he or she falls behind in learning, which makes the situation even worse. The child does not get to experience the thrill of learning something new and may believe that success in school is due to luck or circumstance rather than effort.

There are several factors which may result in negative beliefs about learning:

- *Child Characteristics:* Learning disabilities, difficult temperament, developmental delay, depression, or chronic life stress may make it more difficult for a child to learn in school.
- *Previous Failure:* A child who has failed in school is very likely to stop trying to learn because the child believes he or she cannot learn.
- *Unrealistic standards:* Parents who have standards that are unrealistic can discourage their child who never feels that he or she can measure up to the standard.
- *Competition:* Schools that foster competition—where the focus is always on who is best—are discouraging to children, especially those who may never be “the best” in school.

- *Parent and peer attitudes:* Children whose parents or peers do not think school is important, or parents who do not encourage their children to do their best in school, can deter academic motivation.

Increasing Children's Academic Motivation

The good news is that there are many things that parents can do to increase their child's academic motivation. Positive parent-child relationships form an important background for academic motivation. Letting your child know that you think school is important and providing recognition for their effort and successes can motivate learning. Teaching children effective study skills and habits will also be helpful. Parents are not alone in this—working as a partner with your child's teacher and other school personnel is also important. The following ideas can help you increase your child's motivation to learn.

Encourage Positive Family Relationships and Responsibility

- Provide reasonable structure to help children become independent and responsible.
- Teach your child to be responsible at home by assigning chores and maintaining expectations for proper behavior. Self-discipline at home can transfer to school-related learning.
- Take time to do fun things with your child individually and as a family.
- Have regular conversations with your child and provide time to listen to his or her interests and concerns
- Praise your child for both trying hard and for being successful. All children need to know when they are doing well.

Model the Importance of Learning

- Plan family activities that encourage learning, such as visits to the library, museums, and parks.
- Let your child know that you think learning is important and is the central purpose of school.
- Talk with your child about your interests and likes.
- Let your child see you read books, newspapers, and magazines. Talk about what you read.
- Talk with your child about school and show an interest in what goes on at school.
- Talk with your child about career interests and how school is related to a career.

Teach Habits that Encourage Learning

- Have a set routine for school work. Your child should know when he or she is expected to work on school work each day.
- Set up a place to study where your child has the needed supplies and as much quiet as necessary.

- Make sure your child finishes school work at home before doing things that could distract your child from their school work.
- Limit things that interfere with learning, such as watching TV or playing video games.
- Help your child become expert at something, such as baseball, dinosaurs, insects, whatever, and use those things to encourage learning. For instance, if your child likes baseball, then you can encourage your child to read and write about baseball players.
- Provide opportunities for success to encourage your child to try new things.

Work with Your Child's Teacher to Enhance Academic Motivation

- Show your child that you respect his or her teacher. Do not handle disagreement with the teacher in front of your child.
- Talk regularly with the teacher so that you and the teacher know what is going on in school and at home. Waiting until report cards come out is often too late to make changes.
- Work with your child's teacher to make sure your child learns good study skills (see section on developing study skills).
- Develop a system to give reinforcements at home for working hard in school.

If Your Child Is Already Having Problems

- Have a talk with your child about learning and motivation.
- Let your child know that you are willing to help him or her do better
- Help your child identify things your child does well and not focus just on what your child does poorly.
- Help your child identify things he or she likes that could be used to motivate learning (for example, if your child is interested in animals, have your child read books about animals)
- Learn more about what effects academic motivation by reading some of the books suggested below and talking to school personnel.

Get More Help if You Need It

If your child is struggling despite your efforts, there are other sources of help:

- Talk with your child's teacher, school counselor, or school psychologist for help and advice
- Seek out effective special education and related services if your child has a disability that affects his or her learning or behavior at school.
- Look for tutoring or after-school homework programs
- Seek out parents' groups or PTA groups that can provide support or resources to help you improve your child's motivation.

- Do not be afraid to seek counseling or other help outside of school if necessary.

Resources

- *Overcoming Underachieving: An Action Guide to Helping your Child Succeed in School* by S. Goldstein and N. Mather
- *The Myth of Laziness* by M. Levine
- *The Unmotivated Child: Helping your Underachiever Become a Successful Student* by N. Rathvon
- *Dr. Sylvia Rimm's Smart Parenting: How to Parent so Children Will Learn* by S. Rimm

Websites:

- Family Forum Online—www.familyforumonline.com
- LD Online—www.ldonline.org
- Available from the National Education Association: *Motivation for Learning: Parents Can Help*: www.nea.org/parents/tools/motivate.html
- National Education and Mental Health Center for Children and Families---www.naspcenter.org