

MOTIVATION

“He just doesn’t care about his school work and his grades.” “We can’t get him to do anything.” I hear these phrases quite a bit.

Sometimes parents have unrealistic expectations. A mother told me of her frustration that her 5th grader didn’t care about his grades. He was getting all A’s and B’s. “He is capable of doing better.”, she countered when I remarked that A’s and B’s weren’t so bad. “And he never does the optional work.”, she added.

Other parents would be thrilled if their child were getting straight Cs. Some are happy when their child makes it to every class five days in a row.

Now, I am not saying the first parent should not be concerned or should not try to increase her child’s skills and motivation. Nor am I saying that the third set of parents, who are happy their child made it to class for an entire week, shouldn’t reinforce their child for that. On thing that these examples point to is that you have to start where the child is now and inch them toward where you really want them to be.

Medication and neurotherapy can often help the brain sustain attention to a task. Increased structure and organization training can help students get their work started, completed, and turned in. But without some degree of motivation to do well in school, most kids will not succeed long-term.

We are born with some types of motivation. When we haven’t eaten for a while, our physiological processes signal us with hunger pains that it is time to eat. We don’t need to go into the natural motivations that occur during the teenage years. I’ve never had a client go into withdrawal pains because they’d had no homework the past several days.

We will first discuss helpful *ways to think* about motivating your child and then go into some *practical guidelines*. We will then discuss *specific principles* when working with *ADHD* children.

Thinking About Motivation

- *Kids Are Not Small Adults:* We all know that kids don’t think like adults. Half a century ago, Piaget examined the way children perceive and understand the world around them. Piaget identified a number of stages of mental development in children. For instance, he found that 6 to 7 year old children could identify their own right or left hand consistently, but could not correctly point to the right or left hand of a person facing them. Younger children could not conceive of something still being present if it was temporarily hidden from view.

Recent research has followed the brain development of pre-teens through young adults with new brain imaging technologies. Researchers were surprised to find that the brain is developing through the mid-twenties.

Why should we expect kids that don't think like us adults, to be motivated as we are? The neural pathways that help us be more cautious (and less impulsive) and allow the ability to set and achieve long-term goals (by delaying gratification) don't fully develop until the mid-twenties. Insurance companies knew this long before researchers, as attested by auto insurance rates for 16 to 25-year-olds (especially males).

- *Motivation often moves from external to internal:* External motivation comes from external reinforcement. *Reinforcing* behaviors increases the likelihood that these behaviors will increase in frequency – they will do them more often. *External Reinforcement* is one factor that leads to *Internal Reinforcement*.

Internal reinforcement comes from within. We feel good because we are doing something we consider worthwhile. The activity we are doing may not naturally be all that fun and exciting, but we feel good about doing it. Doing it makes us feel better about ourselves. We are proud of ourselves. Our self-esteem grows. We might get praises from others; we might not. We still feel good because we judge our actions to be right and worthwhile.

One major goal of parenting is to help the child develop more and more internal reinforcement. I want my children to feel good about what they do when they give their best effort, no matter what the result is. The Bhagavad-Gita, a sacred Hindu text, says:

You have a right to your actions,
but never your actions' fruits.
Act for the action's sake...

The wise man lets go of all
results, whether good or bad,
And is focused on the action alone.

A more Western way of saying this is that *we are responsible for what we do – for our actions. The results are up to God.* This certainly doesn't mean that we shouldn't closely observe and learn from the consequences of our actions. Also, the consequences of our previous actions should guide our future actions. However, we shouldn't be too concerned if we did our very best and it didn't turn out quite the way we wanted it to.

I want my children to develop an *internal compass* to guide themselves. I don't want their behavior completely determined by their present peer group. I want them to think for themselves. People bound to external reinforcers, bend with the wind. They don't stand up to their internal truths. They run with the crowd because the crowd provides external reinforcement, no matter if the crowd is courageously serving humanity or jumping off a cliff.

Most of humanities major advances have come from people with a sharp and persistent internal compass. We are told that the “crowd” often did not reinforce the behavior of

Jesus. The situation appears to have been quite the opposite. The doctor who promoted a sterilized operating room environment to prevent infections was first thought of as a nutcase. Rosa Parks did not receive a standing ovation when she sat at the front of the bus. She did however, give a major push to the civil rights movement. A story about Thomas Edison tells that he conducted from 5,000 to 10,000 experiments before he perfected the electric light bulb. About half-way through the experiments, a friend said, “Thomas, are you nuts? You’ve failed thousands of times. Why don’t you just give up?” Thomas replied, “Give up; are you nuts? I’ve already eliminated thousands of ways that don’t work. I’m getting closer and closer to the solution.” Now that’s internal reinforcement as well as a nice re-framing job.

I’m not always going to be around to directly reinforce my children. That’s one reason I want them to develop internal reinforcement. However, I can’t directly give them the ability to reinforce themselves. The best way I can help them develop this internal reinforcement is to provide consistent external reinforcement with wild, but careful, abandon. This simply means to praise and show appreciation to your kids. It is good to praise children when they do what you ask them to or they do something well. It is also good to show your love and acceptance of them “out of the blue” or unconditionally.

- *Punishment does not lead to long-term motivation.* By definition, punishment decreases behavior (makes behavior less frequent and less likely). We usually think of motivation as having the desire to *engage* in certain behaviors, not stop behaviors.

If you focus only on stopping undesirable behaviors, instead of teaching and reinforcing alternative, more appropriate behaviors; your child may decrease these behaviors. However new, more adaptive and appropriate behaviors will likely not develop. Sometimes these children do less and less, eventually wanting to engage in few, if any, activities. They are not motivated to do anything. This is one of the symptoms of depression.

- *The bond between parent and child largely determines the ability of the parent to motivate their child.* Of course, children are motivated by getting what they want, like tasty treats, toys, and activities they enjoy. Children who have a strong bond with their parents are also motivated to do things that please their parents. They are motivated when parents approve and feel proud of them.

Developing trust between parent and child is a large part of developing bonding. As parents, we are keenly aware when our child is not trustworthy. We may not always as clearly see trust as a two-way street. As a parent, every time we don’t do what we say we are going to do, every time we don’t follow-through, and every time we don’t appear congruent in our actions; we lose trust with our kids. Being congruent means that our words, emotion, and actions are all in sync. We will address this more, later. The point to remember now is to *follow-through with all consequences that you set up.* Don’t make threats that you are not prepared to follow-through with. Don’t say, “We’ll do that tomorrow”, unless you really mean it.

- *Do you know what is reinforcing to your child?* Remember that what is reinforcing to you, may not be reinforcing to your child. See the Practical Guidelines and Exercise One for more on this.

Practical Guidelines

- *The first rule is to Start with Reinforcement to encourage the behaviors you want from your child.* The more children learn to behave appropriately in meeting their desires and expressing their feelings, the less need and time they will have for inappropriate behavior. Many inappropriate behaviors are at least partly caused by low self-esteem (anger toward ourselves) and anger toward others. When we develop competence in completing a wide range of tasks and in handling our emotions appropriately, we feel intrinsically good about ourselves and gain approval from others. This leads to better self-esteem and provides little need to feel frustration and anger.

We learn new behaviors and become more skillful and competent with reinforcement. Reinforcement is defined as a stimulus (a thing or activity) that comes after a behavior and makes that behavior more likely to occur in the future. If we try to reinforce a behavior and that behavior doesn't increase, then, by definition, we haven't really reinforced the behavior. Two major things might have gone wrong:

1. We didn't give the reinforcement immediately after the behavior occurred and may have ended up reinforcing some other behavior.
2. What we did simply wasn't reinforcing.

We will get into more detail about the qualities of successful reinforcement later. Right now, I want you to understand the importance of stepping-up the reinforcement in your child's life. You may think he's getting a lot of reinforcement by you and others. However, if he is engaging in inappropriate behaviors at a problematic frequency and intensity, he is not getting enough reinforcement for the behaviors he should be doing – period. You have to step-up the level of reinforcement before any of the discipline strategies will work on a long-term basis.

- *Find out what is reinforcing to your child.* The simplest and surest way is to ask your child what she wants. Some kids will say “nothing”, “I don’t care” or “What do you care?”, if your relationship with your child is troubled. Of course it’s best to talk about these things when you are getting along well together. Some kids really don’t know what they like or want. Do **Exercise One** with your child.

Another way to explore what is reinforcing to your child is to watch her. What does she do when she can do whatever she wants to? What does she like to eat and drink? What does she do the most when she is with her friends? What kind of friends does she hang out with?

- *Notice what your child is already doing well.* Look for little things to reinforce your child. As humans, we are wired to ignore things that are going well and start paying attention when things go wrong. It's human nature to ignore our kids when they are behaving and all is peaceful and then to get upset when they misbehave. This "wiring" was likely an extremely adaptive function many generations ago. It still is, in many situations. However, it's not a good way to raise kids in our current culture. *We need to pay attention to and consistently reinforce our kids.* Please try **Exercise Two** for the next several weeks.
- Do all you can to create a loving bond between yourself and your child. Start on **Exercise Three** and do it as long as you can. When your child is a teenager, you probably won't be able to do this everyday. But it is worthwhile to have these types of one-to-one interactions with your child whenever you can work it out. Remember *Cat's in the Cradle* by Harry Chapin? Go to <http://www.birdsnest.com/catcrad.htm> (for the lyrics and instrumental version) to refresh your memory or create a new one.
- *Successful Reinforcement:*
 1. *Reinforce immediately following desired behavior.* Reinforcement generally increases behaviors that have occurred right before the reinforcement is given. If you wait, you may reinforce behavior that you did not intend to. If it is not possible to reinforce immediately following the desirable behavior, be sure to link or associate the reinforcers with the behavior. This is usually done by verbally stating the desirable behavior while giving reinforcement. For example, Mary cleaned her room right after school. You notice her clean room when you get home at 5:30 PM. You might say, "Mary, your room looks great. I'm really proud of you. You did a great job and all on your own initiative." You give her a hug as you are saying this.
 2. *Give frequent reinforcement.* Consistent reinforcement is needed to establish new behaviors. Ideally, reinforce every time your child completes a new behavior, such as putting her dishes away after a meal. You can begin to intermittently reinforce (once every two or three times and then once every four or five times and so on) after a new behavior is well established. At that point the total level of reinforcement should not decrease. You will, instead be reinforcing other new and emerging behaviors.
 3. *Give at least a four to one ratio of reinforcement to negative feedback (criticism/punishment/discipline)* A ratio of 40 to 1 would be 10 times better. Reinforce before they misbehave. Reprimands should be given close to the child and in a calm, soft voice.
 4. *You must be sincere and congruent when giving reinforcement, especially social reinforcement.* Children are great at knowing when adults are being honest and enthusiastic or when we're just going through the motions. The phrase "Good job" can be said in ways that might mean "You really

messed up good” to “I don’t really care how you did, but the book told me to say this” to “That was incredible; thank you!!” The pitch, loudness, and tone of your voice; as well as your body language make all the difference. Remember that a majority of the *meaning* for others of our verbal messages comes from the non-content characteristics of the message, including voice tone and quality and body language. Being congruent means that the total message – content, voice tone, and body language all fits together. Have you ever heard someone say, “Have a nice day” in a sarcastic tone. That’s an incongruent message.

5. *Always follow-through with consequences you make and promises you give.*
6. *Rely on social reinforcement the most.*
7. *Earning time for specific activities is generally much better than earning things.* Don’t say that the child can earn an X-Box if he gets straight A’s this 9-weeks. There are several things wrong about this approach, but for now we will concentrate on earning the X-Box. Most children rightfully assume that once they earn the X-Box, they can play it whenever they want to, even when they have stopped doing their homework and their grades are sinking. It is usually better to earn time on the X-Box by completing specific tasks.

Specific Principles For Developing Motivation in ADHD Children

Most of the following principles apply to all children. However, in general, they are more important and need to be applied more consistently and intensely to children with ADHD. For instance, providing a highly structured environment is usually needed for ADHD kids. All kids need some structure, but a highly structured environment might be detrimental (or at best, unnecessary) for some kids who have already learned to develop their own internal structure.

- *Support your spouse and show a united front.* Don’t argue with your spouse in front of your children, especially concerning discipline of your children. Most kids have a gift of producing wedges between parents, but ADHD kids are often at the top of their game in this arena. Moms usually report they have less ability to get their ADHD children to comply than Dads do. This societal trend is exaggerated when Dads don’t fully support Mom’s decisions in dealing with the children.
- *Take care of yourself and your spouse.* This is the other kind of support you need to give and get. Studies show that there is often more stress in households with ADHD children. I know you don’t need a study to tell you that. Schedule some time for yourself – with friends, alone, or whatever helps charge up your batteries. Scheduling time together – alone as a couple is also important. Practicing some type of meditation or relaxation training is helpful. At *The Attention and Learning Clinic*, we offer Heart Rate Variability Training (also known as

Coherence Training) to help parents relax, slow down, and become more effective in working with their children.

- *Parents must be more consistent, firm, and highly structured.* This doesn't necessarily mean that parents need to act like Army Sergeants with kids having no say about anything. Negotiating solutions to problems is usually beneficial. Brainstorming possible solutions and then analyzing which ones make the most sense and have the best shot at working, gives children some power and voice. Kids are more likely to take responsibility for doing specific tasks when they have been given some responsibility for coming up with when and how the task will be done.

What this principle does mean is that children with ADHD usually need a lot of external structure, since they are often slow in developing internal structure. Having a specific time to get started on homework is one example. ADHD kids need to have a specific place where completed homework goes. (Please see the Section on School Organization and Study Skills for more information on this.) Reviewing the next days schedule on the night before also gives structure.

- *Don't get caught up in arguing with your ADHD child.* Research indicates that children are more *process* oriented and adults more *outcome* oriented. I never quite understood what this meant or how it was relevant to parent-child interactions until I saw a mom and her 11-year-old daughter, who both claimed they won every argument. The daughter would argue with almost everything her mother said, especially when mom wanted her daughter to do something. The mother would join in – remember it takes two to argue. The argument would often escalate into a frenzied shouting match. Finally, the daughter would end up doing what the mother had asked. The daughter was reinforced (won) because she controlled the *process* – the argument. Kids are also naturally reinforced when they sense they are controlling the outside environment, in this case, her mother's emotions. The mother was reinforced because she eventually controlled the *outcome*; the daughter completed the task. You can see how the argumentative behavior is mutually reinforced and likely to get more frequent and intense.

The solution here is to calmly enforce the consequences you have set up. Yes, I know this is a lot easier said than done. Do your best.

- *Be relatively non-emotional when dealing with problem behavior.* Yes, this is another way to describe the above principle. However, it is one of the most important, so let's talk a little more about it. One of the primary survival tasks for children to learn is how to control the environment around them. Remember when your child first reached out and grabbed something, probably to bring it to his mouth to chew on? Babies and children have built-in reinforcement for this activity. Acting upon the environment is necessary for survival. The author of

1-2-3 Magic describes the first time a child throws a rock into a pond and observes the ripples that go on and on throughout the pond. What power! What power it is to get a really big person to lose their cool. It might also be scary, but look what you did!

The solution is to stop being controlled by your child. Decide to respond calmly but steadily and do the best you can.

- *More frequent feedback is needed for ADHD kids.* ADHD kids don't monitor their own behavior as often or as well as many other kids do. They need more outside (external) feedback.
- *Reinforce small chunks of behavior, especially for younger children.* An immediate and natural way of reinforcing behavior is to say, "When you are finished with X, you can do Y. Consider reinforcing specific behavior rather than long-term outcomes. Deals like, "We will get you a car, if you get straight A's this school year", are poor bets for success. Even if it works, what about next school year? Do they get an airplane for straight A's? Also, see Successful Reinforcement, Number 7, above.
- *Reinforcement or Rewards must keep changing to avoid rapid habituation or ineffectiveness.* Early in my career, I helped set up behavioral programs for ADHD students that worked incredibly well – for about a week or two. Then they just stopped working. The student didn't seem motivated by the reward anymore. Our problem was that we tended to have one reinforcement or reward for the student. In one case, a student got time on the computer (back in the days when computers were a rare and desired commodity) for a specific number of minutes of on-task behavior (focusing on schoolwork). Within a few days, his total on-task behavior had greatly improved. Within two-weeks, it back to where it had been before we started the program. Why? There were just a few things he could do on the computer and he tired of this quickly.

The solution here is to have a wide variety of possible rewards. Ideally, the child would choose from this variety of reinforcements. Most likely the child's choice would have the most reinforcement value at that moment.

- *When you want your child to do something, tell them to do it, don't ask.* Of course you can and should use "Please". But don't phrase the request as a question. To be polite, in English, we may use the question format when we are really issuing a command. Example: "Don't you think it's time you did your homework". If you are really asking a question, you should be okay with a "No" response.
- *Leave behavioral programs in effect for an indefinite period of time.* ADHD children don't integrate newly learned behaviors as quickly as non-ADHD children. They need longer to internalize the new behaviors. Behavioral

programs should be gradually faded out. The principle is similar to the point brought up about gradually fading out 504 Plan accommodations. (Please see Section 3 on School Accommodations.)