

Boosting Motivation

For parents who value education, one of the greatest challenges is raising kids who just aren't all that interested in school. It's exceedingly frustrating to watch teens and tweens procrastinate, do the minimum work to get by, and shrug off lackluster grades. Mothers and fathers who see it as their parental responsibility to help kids achieve their potential often step in, doing everything they can to boost their children's motivation and improve their scholastic performance.

Paging the Homework Police

Mothers and fathers I see in my practice often double-check assignments that teachers post online, sit down with their middle school students to monitor nightly homework, quiz their kids before tests, and supervise each and every step of long-term projects. Parents email their high school students' teachers for weekly progress updates, pay their kids to take advanced classes, and offer rewards in return for desired results. Most recently, I witnessed parents promise a 14-year-old an iBook and a 15-year-old a brand-new car if they earned specific grades. The question is, do teens and tweens benefit from these interventions and incentives?

In my experience, when parents devote their evenings to supervising their kids' assignments and test preparation, grades sometimes improve--at least temporarily. But lasting change is rare. Worse, these efforts are often completely ineffective. Just this week, two teens I see in therapy happened to describe their reactions to their parents' reminders and "lectures" about school. Amanda, a high school freshman, said, "My mother's nagging me about my homework isn't going to make me more motivated." Lloyd, a sophomore, expressed that his parents' efforts, however well-intentioned, often backfire: "Every time my mother tells me to do something for school, it just makes me want to do it less, even if I had been intending to do it."

Worse, in my mind, is that when parents become the "homework police," homes turn into veritable battlegrounds for nightly skirmishes about when and how kids tackle their assignments. Family life quickly deteriorates, the sacred parent-teen relationship sacrificed in the hope of an improved report card. And yet, despite the lack of progress, unpleasant evenings, and angrier, more resentful teens, parents can't stop. Their thinking goes, "Now that the stakes are higher, how can I just sit by and let my child fail?" Parents convey their own anxiety when they say: "Unless he gets good grades, his choices for colleges will be limited," or "She's going to be disappointed when she gets those college rejections," or "He's ruining his entire future."

The Key: Developing Skills

New research may help parents realize that their best-intentioned, Herculean efforts to boost their teens' and tweens' motivation may actually be doing more harm than good. In a remarkable new longitudinal study, researchers tracked 106 children from ages 1 through 29 to determine factors that contributed to later leadership--a skill now seen as essential for the success of young people in the 21st century. The study examined the role of parents, innate intelligence, inner motivation, childhood social skills, and personality traits (e.g., extroversion). They found that what matters most is: (1) the capacity to be socially engaging, (2) a desire for new skills and knowledge, and (3) the ability to commit to pursuing passions and goals until achieving mastery and success. Parental support in fostering kids' interests helped. But the key was for young people to take risks and enjoy-- and become good at--finding solutions to tackling problems. Notably, inner motivation is far more important than IQ in predicting later leadership ability.

Applying Findings at Home

While this study suggests the need for teachers to make changes in how children are taught in school, parents too can benefit immensely from using these findings to guide their interventions at home. Here are some of the attitudes and behaviors most linked to later leadership and success-and some ideas about how parents can shift their strategies to best promote them:

1. Kids who derive satisfaction from achieving their own goals are more likely to persevere and succeed

- Parents should help children identify the interests and goals that are meaningful for them, rather than encourage them to take classes and do extracurricular activities they see as “good for college.”
- Rather than asking about grades on tests, ask about what they are learning in school to see where sparks of curiosity may be kindled. It is not necessary to run out and buy expensive musical instruments at the first sign of interest; simple encouragement might be a walk in the woods or visit to a local pond or museum when a science wildlife unit excites a child.
- Parents who set arbitrary standards for success (e.g., “no grade below a B,” “high honor roll,” “at least 3 AP courses”) undermine the process by which kids establish and connect with their own goals. Better to ask about what students want to achieve for themselves, starting with short-term and doable steps (e.g., turning in all homework, taking better notes, editing papers).

2. External rewards stifle inner motivation required for later success • This research strongly questions the value of parental over-involvement in academics. When students see that their parents are more invested than they are in their academic performance, their success (or lack thereof) becomes more about pleasing (or disappointing) their parents than themselves.

- Rather than offering money or coveted items in exchange for good academic performance, parents might instead focus on how students feel about their work. Are they proud of the paper they wrote? Do they feel good about their class presentation?
- When kids ask for external rewards (e.g., “Andrew’s parents pay him \$20 for every A”), parents can clarify that it is their work; they should feel good about their own grades.

3. Kids need to be comfortable taking risks

- Parents, therefore, have to become comfortable with kids having the real-world experiences that will enable them to learn from mistakes or missteps and find passions they truly want to pursue.
- This means letting kids try new things when they are determined to do so, even those you think might not work out well for them. This goes for sports as well as academic pursuits. Many an athlete has learned a great deal from sitting on the bench or benefited from becoming the manager of a team rather than its star player.
- Encourage students to venture beyond their comfort zones-for example, trying out for the school play, running for office, and so forth. Convey that it’s the effort and experience, not the desired outcome, which matters most.

4. Pursuing challenges over time and finding solutions to problems breeds success

- If kids are struggling academically, rather than insisting that they speak with their teachers or go for extra help, ask them what they think could help them better understand confusing concepts or assignments. You might be pleasantly surprised by their creativity and resourcefulness. Plus, they are more likely to follow through on their own solutions.

5. Kids who learn to cope with and recover from failure are most apt to persevere

- Although it is probably the hardest thing for parents to sit by and watch kids “fail,” this study suggests failure is not the enemy. So refrain from rescuing kids by writing notes to excuse them from work, staying up until all hours to help them-or, worse, doing their work for them-to insure they meet paper deadlines and are ready for big tests.
- Don’t punish bad grades or disappointing test performances. If they do poorly or lose credit for assignments handed in late, internal consequences may be more valuable than external penalties.

All this doesn’t mean parents shouldn’t care. It is still important to model a strong work ethic and support good study habits by creating an environment conducive to learning-including setting age-appropriate limits on screen time and other distractions. But this study confirms that parents who want to encourage teens and tweens to persevere through challenges should step back, as hard as that may be. When students are given more ownership of their own learning, they acquire not just specific academic information, but also far more important life skills that will serve them well wherever they go to college. Besides, in this age of competition, kids whose parents have induced, if not engineered, their stellar resumes are still not guaranteed acceptance into their top colleges.

About Roni Cohen-Sandler

Dr. Roni Cohen-Sandler is a clinical psychologist specializing in parenting; the issues of women and adolescent girls, mother-daughter relationships; and neuropsychological assessments (e.g., for learning difficulties, attention disorders, etc.). Described as an energizing, humorous, and inspiring speaker, she presents lectures and workshops to public and private schools, community organizations, hospitals, corporations, and universities. She is the author of three books, including the national best-seller *I’m Not Mad, I Just Hate You!*, *Trust Me, Mom-Everyone Else is Going!* and her most recent, *Stressed-Out Girls: Helping Them Thrive in the Age of Pressure*.

Dr. Cohen-Sandler is a frequent expert for national media, appearing on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *NPR*, and *Oprah*. She has been quoted in publications such as *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *Marie Claire*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Seventeen*, *Parenting*, *Teen People*, *Family Circle*, *Teen Vogue*, *Redbook*, *Working Mother*, and *Glamour*.