

10 Ways to Motivate Your Child to Do Better in School

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"My son is a smart kid, but he doesn't work hard in school. Now the teacher said he's in danger of getting F's in most of his subjects."

"My daughter just does enough to get by, instead of trying her best. When I talk to her about how important it is to get good grades in high school, she rolls her eyes and tells me she doesn't care and that it's boring. It's enough to make me pull my hair out."

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Do you have a child who comes home with failing grades year after year—or straight C's when you know he could get A's? You assume, based on his abilities, that he should be more successful in school. It's enough to drive you crazy—especially because you know how important it is for him to do well so he can get into college someday—or even just graduate. You're worried sick about his future, so you nag and get on his case about his laziness, lack of motivation and irresponsibility. You just don't get why he's so uninterested in doing well, so you try everything you can think of to motivate him. But try as you might, the situation doesn't get better—in fact, it gets worse.

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As a parent, it's difficult not to become invested in our child's academic life because we know how important it is for their future. From our perspective, it makes no sense that our kids would put things like friends or electronics before their work. The truth is, most kids *are* motivated, but not by what we think should motivate them. Look at it this way: your child is probably highly motivated and not at all lazy when it comes to things that excite him, like video games, music, Facebook and what cool new jeans to buy. One thing for certain is that if you pressure your child in order to motivate him, it almost always makes things worse.

Understand that kids need to buy into the value of doing well. Think about it in terms of your own life—even as an adult, you may know it's best to eat right, but actually following through is another story! In a way, your child must own the importance of doing well *himself*. Of course external factors may also get in the way (mental or physical illnesses, learning disabilities or behavioral disorders, family issues and substance abuse, to name a few.)

For some people, all the stars are aligned at the right time—motivation, skill and attitude combine to create a successful outcome. But for most of us, it's way trickier and a much more uneven path to motivation and success. When you think about it, not every kid asks teachers for help, does all their homework on time all the time, reviews the material they learned each night and puts aside all the other distractions to get down to their studies. The ones who do are typically the kids who have what

is called “good executive functioning,” because the front part of their brain is more developed. This plays a significant role in school achievement. It helps the regulation of emotions, attention span, perseverance, and flexibility. For many, many kids their functioning often does not develop until much later in the adolescent years. This is particularly tough if you are a parent who was responsible at an early age, but you now have a child lagging behind. It’s hard to imagine that they’re not just lazy, irresponsible and unmotivated. Of course, if you start believing these things about your child, you will simply get annoyed, frustrated, angry, and reactive to their laziness—which will contribute to the power struggle and to their defiance. How can you avoid doing this? Read on to find out.

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1. Keep a relationship with your kids that is open, respectful and positive. Stay on your kids’ team, don’t play against them. This will allow you to be most influential with them, which is your most important parenting tool. Punishing, preaching, threatening and manipulating will get you nowhere and will be detrimental to your relationship and to their ultimate motivation. Your feelings of anxiety, frustration and fear are normal and understandable. But reacting to your kids out of these emotions will be ineffective. Remember, your child is not behaving this way on purpose to make your life miserable or because they are lazy good-for-nothings. When you feel yourself getting worked up, try saying to yourself, “My child is just not there yet.” Remember, your job is to help them learn how to be responsible. If you get negative and make this a moral issue, then your child might become defiant, reacting to you instead of thinking through things himself.

2. Incorporate the “when you” rule. One of life’s lessons is that we get the goodies after we do the work. When you practice shooting hoops every day, you start making more baskets. You get paid after you work at your job. So start saying things like, “When you finish studying you are welcome to go to Gavin’s house.” Or “When your homework is completed, we can discuss watching that movie you wanted to see on Netflix.” Enforce this rule and stick to it. If your child does not yet have the ability to plan and initiate and persevere, by sticking to this rule, you are helping them learn how to do what their own brain is not yet equipped to do, which is to create the structure for him.

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3. When you are invited in. If your child is not studying and his grades are dropping, you’re invited in whether he wants you or there or not. Again, you’re there to help set up a structure that he is not able to create for himself. The structure might include scheduled study times, having the computer out in a public place in your home, and saying, “No video games or TV until after homework is done.” You might decide that he must spend a certain amount of hours devoted to study time. During this time, no electronics or other distractions are allowed. You might make the rule that even if he finishes all his homework, he must complete study time by reviewing, reading, or editing. You might make the rule that he devotes an hour-and-a-half to quiet time, no electronics, and just doing his work. Understand that it’s not meant as punishment; rather, this is helping him develop a good work ethic and to focus on his school subjects. Some kids do better listening to music while they study, but no other electronics or multi-tasking is recommended.

4. Ask the teacher. If your child's grades and work habits are not up to par, you can set up a plan by sitting down with him and his teachers. He might have to check with them to make sure he has everything before leaving school, and then check with you before going back to school to make sure all his work is in his bag. Once your child gets better at managing his time, completing his work and reviewing his subjects before tests, then it's time for you to back off.

5. Identify a study spot. You may need to sit with your child while she's doing her work or at least be nearby to help her stay on track. She may need a quiet location away from brothers and sisters or she may do better in a room near others. You can help her experiment. But once you find what works best, keep her in that location. You will not do her work for her, but you may need to review her work and ask her if a certain paragraph makes sense to her, for example.

6. Break it down. Decide together whether or not it will be helpful to your child for you to help him break down his assignments into small pieces and organize on a calendar what he should get done each day. You can get him a big wall calendar or a white board. You might also get extra help from his teacher or get a tutor for him if that's in your budget.

7. Be kind but firm. Try your best to be a parent who is kind, helpful, consistent and firm versus punitive, over-functioning and controlling. For every negative interaction with your child, try to create ten positive ones. Try to put the focus on supporting and encouraging him instead of worrying and nagging. When you start to believe his grades are a reflection of you or your parenting and that you are responsible for his outcome, you will be on his case—and it will be harmful and ineffective.

8. Lack of motivation or anxiety? Recognize that so much of your child's lack of motivation (or what looks like irresponsibility) might be his own anxiety or shame about academics and schoolwork. Most people have anxiety about doing certain things and avoid them like the plague. Kids may not be able to explain all of this to you because it's not always on a conscious level for them. Here's a typical scenario. Let's say your child tells you he doesn't have homework when he actually does. This will stir up your anxiety. When you react to it by yelling or criticizing, your child will manage his anxiety by distancing from it—and from you—more. While a little anxiety can motivate, too much blocks your child's ability to think and to have access to the part of the brain that helps him with motivation. Keep your emotions in check by recognizing that it's your child's anxiety at play rather than his laziness. Your job (and how you will be most helpful to him) is to not react to his anxiety or your own.

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Recognize that sometimes your child's feelings of shame, inferiority or anxiety can be misinterpreted as a lousy attitude, lack of motivation, and irresponsibility. Often the cover up for these vulnerable emotions can take the form of acting out, shutting down, avoidance, and defiance. Remember that what is happening now may look very different as your child matures and develops. In the meantime, in a positive relationship, lend him your brain by helping him with the structure and habits he can't pull off on his own. And calm yourself by understanding the bigger picture of what is going on now.

9. Teach life balance. Remember to always keep the big picture in mind. Rather than go crazy over your child's grades, help her to balance her life with friendships, other activities, volunteer work and family activities. Get involved with her school affairs when you can and take an interest in her school projects.

10. Don't futurize. When we see our child seeming to have no interest in his life, it's easy to start fast forwarding into the future. When he acts like he doesn't care about anything except video games and his friends, we worry that he won't be successful or even functional on his own. This ramps up our anxiety and our fear. But here's the truth: none of us have a crystal ball or can really see into the future. Focusing on the negative things your child is doing will only bring the spotlight on them, and may set you both up for a power struggle. Instead, focus on your child's positive traits and help him work on those in the present. Is he outgoing, helpful, or good with animals? Focus on all the things that go into a developed, successful person, not just academics and grades and help your child develop in social, creative, and emotional ways.

Parents are often so worried about their child falling behind that they end up in a power struggle with their kids over it, but nothing gets better. They go round and round, just fighting about the grades and the work. But if you as the parent can calm down and understand that this is not just a bad attitude and an unmotivated kid—and that you can't force them to be motivated—then you can actually start meeting your child where he is and helping where he needs help. Remember, your goal is to stop the reactivity and solve the problem.

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