



Parent & Community Network Newsletter

Focus on
Motivation

Issue #3 October 2011

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“There are three important things to remember about education. The first one is motivation, the second is motivation, and the third is motivation.”
—Terrell Bell (former U.S. Secretary of Education)

Message From the Editor

With a couple of months of school now completed, some of you may be noticing that your children are not as motivated as you think they should be. In this issue, we will discuss motivation: the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the dos and don'ts of getting your child to want to realize his potential, and the different ways in which children are motivated to succeed.

As always, I encourage all members to submit articles for future issues, suggestions for making the newsletter more effective, and feedback. Remember, this is YOUR newsletter. If you are interested in submitting an article for publication, next month's topic will be "anxiety and stress." All submissions should be sent to nancyarey@mac.com.

Nancy Arey Cohen

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Student Interests and Motivation

An important way to motivate students is to focus on their interests. Interest-based learning is student-centered and increases the likelihood of students being active participants in the learning process. Students have opportunities to focus on topics they consider personally or culturally meaningful and relevant. The most effective learning occurs when students are immersed in an activity in which they can make connections to prior knowledge and interests (Buchanan, Woerner, Bigam, & Cascade, 1997; Dewey, 1965; VanTassel-Baska, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, student-centered curricula and instructional activities are guided by the answers to two fundamental questions: How relevant to students, both now and for the future, is the schoolwork they are doing? and How can I use my students' interests to help them learn and to keep them engaged?

Alber and Heward (1996) described "behavior traps" as a way to help develop students' academic and social skills. A behavior trap uses a student's interests to "trap" him or her into using and developing important skills. Effective behavior traps have four essential features:

1. They are "baited" with powerful, virtually irresistible reinforcers that "lure" the student to the trap.
2. Only a small, easy-to-perform response that is already in the student's repertoire is necessary to enter the trap.
3. Once the student is inside the trap, interrelated contingencies of reinforcement motivate the student to acquire, extend, and maintain targeted academic or social skills.
4. They can remain effective over a long period of time because the student shows relatively few, if any, satiation effects. . . . The fundamental nature of behavior traps: easy to enter and difficult to exit. (Alber & Heward, p. 286)

The strategies recommended by Alber and Heward (1996) hold important implications for motivating gifted underachievers. In this chapter, we extend the application of behavior traps to the motivation of gifted students.

Motivation Traps

Planning, setting, and evaluating motivation traps is a five-step process.

1. Identify which students need help. Which student is struggling? Who is off task? Who seems uninterested, bored, frustrated?
2. Discover what interests students. Who are their heroes? What are their hobbies? How do students spend their leisure time? Students' interests serve as the bait for motivation traps. "Any trap is only as effective as the bait with which it is set. Make an inventory of your students' interests with the intention of using their most zealous preoccupation as irresistible trap bait, like the most delicious cheese for the mousetrap" (Alber & Heward, 1996, p. 286).
3. Find resources and activities to address students' interests. How can I match the topic, lesson, or unit to students' interests? What resources are available? Sometimes, students themselves are the best sources of materials and activities related to their interests.
4. Set the trap. A motivation trap cannot work unless the student gets "caught." Make it easy for students to enter the trap; only a small, easy-to-perform response should be required. Once inside the trap, the student must then use and extend target skills in order to maintain and increase contact with his or her favorite topic or activity. Many underachieving gifted students quickly lose interest in an activity because they are bored by unnecessary repetitions and impatient to proceed to the next level (Howell, Heward, & Swassing, 1996). Such problems can be prevented by providing gifted students opportunities to participate in activities based on task completion, rather than time schedules. Motivation traps can provide an excellent vehicle to address this need.
5. Evaluate the trap. Few plans remain effective without some type of evaluation. Therefore, it is important to appraise students' successes and failures and consider ways to modify the motivation plan or trap. What was ineffective or effective? How can the trap be improved? Not all students will respond immediately to the trap. Some students will need more time than others. Provide students with substantive feedback on their performance and progress.

excerpted from *Teaching Strategies in Gifted Education*, part of the Gifted Child Today Reader Series, Chapter 14 by **Donna Y. Ford, Sheila R. Alber, and William L. Heward**

TOP 10 WAYS TO MOTIVATE GIFTED CHILDREN (from About.com Gifted Children)

1. Nurture Your Child's Interests

Provide opportunities for him or her to learn and explore that interest. For example, if your youngster loves dinosaurs, get fact and fiction books about dinosaurs and visit natural history museums. If your child loves science, get science books and science kits and visit science museums. Kids who can explore their interests are more likely to keep their love of learning alive.

2. Expose Your Child to New Ideas and Areas

Sometimes a child lacks motivation because he or she hasn't yet been exposed to what might be a life passion. A child whose true passion is music but who has never had a chance to explore it will not be able to unlock that passion. Look for community programs, not just school programs. Don't overlook traditionally female activities, like dance and gymnastics, for boys. Keep an open mind; it's your child's interests that are important.

3. Use Short-Term Goals and Rewards

Sometimes a child is overwhelmed by a large task. It's not that the task is difficult, but the child may not be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Rather than begin the task, a child will give up before he or she even begins. Help your child see the task as a series of smaller tasks. Make each small task a goal and try setting a reward for that goal.

4. Help Your Child Learn to Manage Time

When they start school, gifted children usually have few problems keeping up with work. They learn quickly and easily. While that may sound like a real advantage, it can lead to problems. These children may never learn to manage their time in order to get work done. At some point, they may feel overwhelmed by the work and don't know how to efficiently complete tasks. Teach your child how to create and use a time-management schedule.

5. Praise Your Child's Efforts

Gifted kids sometimes have trouble connecting personal effort to achievement. Much of what they do and learn comes easily to them, so they can achieve with little effort. To help a child succeed, praise specific efforts at success. For example, instead of saying "Nice work," it's better to say, "You worked hard on your project; you really earned that A." However, avoid the reverse: don't say, "If you worked harder, you would do better."

6. Help Your Child Take Control

Gifted kids sometimes see achievement as something beyond their control. If they succeed, it is due to luck or some other external factor. This attitude makes them feel like effort is pointless. Praising their efforts can help, but these children also need to understand the role personal responsibility plays in success. The way you talk about your own life sends a message. Blaming your boss for your lack of success sends the wrong message.

7. Keep a Positive Attitude About School

Children need to see that their parents value education. Even if a child's problems in school are the school's or teacher's fault, you need to be careful of what you say. Negative attitudes toward school will transfer to your child. If school is a problem, you can point out that even though problems can occur, education is still valuable and effort will lead to success. Blaming the school will allow the child to avoid personal responsibility.

8. Help Your Child Make Connections Between Schoolwork and Their Interests

Sometimes children lack motivation because they don't see a connection between the work they are being asked to do and their goals and interests. A little research may be necessary to find requirements of various jobs. However, unmotivated gifted children generally don't focus on anything but the present.

9. Turn Homework Into Creative Games

Gifted children love a challenge, so by turning otherwise dull homework into a challenging game, you can get your child to do it. Some children like to race, so you can ask them to see how quickly they can get it done -- without mistakes. Checking their work lets them see you care about it. Another creative approach to homework is to link it to an interest. For example, a dull math worksheet can be the decoding assignment of an astronaut's space mission to Mars. Unless the work is done correctly, the mission will fail. Even the smallest mistake can create a problem that can cause the mission to fail.

10. Keep in Mind that Motivation is Not Always About School Achievement

We often equate motivation with school achievement. However, it's important to note that some children are highly motivated to achieve goals, but those goals are unrelated to school. A gifted teen, for example, may be more interested in creating a volunteer community program for the elderly or for the underprivileged.

Achievement is Not Motivation

It's important to remember that while you may get your child to get homework done, he or she may never be truly motivated to do it.

*They can because they
think they can.*
– **Virgil**

A Parent Perspective

By Nancy Arey Cohen

Having raised two gifted children who have graduated from college, moved into their own apartments, and are working in fields they chose for themselves, I feel that I have learned a few things about motivating a gifted child. Of course, every child is different, but these tips may help you:

- “At the end of each day, write down the **constructive criticism** (and the process praise) you’ve given your kids.” (Dweck, pp 211)
- Use the coulda, woulda, shouldas as **rehearsal** for tomorrow. Come up with some **strategies** that you might use the next time a particular **scenario** arises.
- **Do** use **process praise**; “I like how you tried several ways to solve that tricky math problem!” This shows that you appreciate the effort your child is putting in to his work. **Don’t** praise natural ability; “You are so good at math – I knew you would figure it out!” How will the child feel when she comes across a problem she can’t solve?
- Discover what your child’s **goals** for himself are. Work to find **common ground** between his goals and your goals for him. If he wants to be an astronaut and you want him to get good grades, help him see that doing well in school is part of what it takes to become an astronaut. He doesn’t have to take your word for it! Tell him to visit a website that knows: <http://www.nasa.gov/about/career/index.html>
- Find **mentors, coaches, teachers** that will help your child explore the world through her area of interest. She can learn about science, geography, and mathematics, and hone her research skills while learning everything there is to know about pandas.
- How can you show that you **value** your child’s **strengths** and **interests**? Is your child a visual/spatial learner and good with a map? Let him be the guide on your next outing. If you wind up taking a wrong turn, help him get back on track and **show him you trust him** by giving him the lead again. Is she terrific at drawing three-dimensional objects? Let her help draw out the new layout you are thinking of for the living room. Does she have a different idea about where the table should go? **Give her input value** and consider her suggestion, even if you don’t end up using it.
- Give your child **responsibility** for his success or failure wherever you can. Let him know that you are there for him, and that you love and value him even when he fails at something. (Sometimes we need to say these things out loud!) If he has a setback, help him plan a better **strategy** for next time. Resist the urge to plan it for him.
- **Keep your expectations high**, and make sure your child has the **strategies and support** necessary to meet those expectations. Instead of ‘sink or swim’, provide your child will flotation devices. Over time, she’ll develop her swimming skills and need less **external support**. In some areas that are rougher water for her, she may always wear a life jacket – that’s okay! That’s what they’re for!

Types of Motivation

Intrinsic Motivation:

A child who is intrinsically motivated derives pleasure from a job well done, from the joy of accomplishment, from being a self-starter, or from conquering a challenge. What others think is not a concern. What is expected is not, necessarily, a concern. This child is motivated from within. The child may enjoy getting good grades or the recognition of doing a job well; however, those rewards are not sufficient to motivate the child if he is not interested in the assignment or activity.

Extrinsic Motivation:

A child who is extrinsically motivated achieves in order to receive some reward from someone else: money, gifts, applause, recognition, or good grades. The personal feeling of success is not sufficient to motivate the child. Whether or not this child is interested in an assignment or activity, the promise of some external reward is sufficient to sustain motivation to completion.

Q & A: Motivating an Underachiever

By Mariam Willis, Parent Outreach Specialist, NAGC

Do you have a question about parenting your gifted child? Visit our NEW [Parenting for High Potential Blog](#) to submit questions and share experiences.

Q. My gifted teen is an underachiever. He makes mediocre grades at school and is generally disinterested in meeting his potential. How can I motivate him?

When we spoke, this mom said her son loves skateboarding. He even designed a new skateboard course for the local skate park by researching the dynamics of how different angles would create the opportunity for skaters to perform various stunts. While hanging out at the park, he made conversation with the owners, showed them his designs, and eventually a course similar to his designs was built.

A. Parenting is tricky business. We receive so many messages from society about what will make our children a success. When motivating your gifted child it is critical to determine whether you are seeking to inspire, discipline, or motivate. Attempting to inspire or motivate with the language of discipline can shut down the gifted at any age and may create a life-long [underachiever](#).

Inspiration is the process of planting seeds of possibility and is best shared with no strings attached. One of the best ways to inspire your gifted child is to support what they love, like skateboarding, even if you do not “get” it. Meaningfully connecting with your child on his ground is likely to lead him to be interested in meaningfully connecting with you on your ground. When engaging your child, listen closely for opportunities to help him grow his unique interests by identifying resources, setting goals, or finding like-minded peers. However, leave the follow-through to him unless he asks for help.

Discipline, on the other hand, is better thought of as behavior training. Consider: You may want your child to care for his space and belongings in a certain way, to be punctual, or to approach negative emotions with self-control. This is discipline, which is about being able to follow through when motivation or inspiration is not present. In this case, it sounds like you want your son to be disciplined in his approach to school so that he can achieve good grades.

Finally, motivation is a driving force, a feeling that can be stimulated by internal or external rewards. We can be motivated by experiences, belonging, grades, money, stickers... The key to stoking the fires of self-esteem and life-long success is noticing and supporting the experiences that [intrinsically motivate](#) your son. Intrinsic motivation is often the natural state of being for the gifted. Sometimes external rewards can be established to achieve a short term goal, but without intrinsic drive the gifted child’s movement toward the goal may diminish. Keep a long term perspective. Value your child’s unique drive above academic achievement.

When context is removed, it sounds like your son is an intrinsically motivated, high achiever. Celebrate him! Then address discipline for academic success, if necessary.

Additional Resources:

Carol Brainbridge, Board Member, Indiana Association for Gifted Children, [Top 10 Ways to Motivate Gifted Children](#)

Lisa Van Gemert, Gifted Youth Specialist for MENSA [Underachievement: the label that keeps on taking](#)

On skateboarding, [Dr. Tae](#), Skateboarding Physics Professor

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

-- Henry David Thoreau

RESOURCES

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- Galbraith, J. (1996). *The Gifted Kids Survival Guide: Teen Handbook*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Heacox, D. (1991). *Up from Underachievement*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Press.
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- Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead Hardcover (A Division of Penguin Group USA).
- Siegle, D. & McCoach, B. (2005). *Motivating Gifted Students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Webb, J. T., Gore, J. L., Amend, E. R., DeVries, A. R. (2007). *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/underachievement.htm>

Mission Statement of Parent & Community Network

It is the belief of the Parent & Community Network that the families of gifted students and resources within their communities are a crucial part of the growth of gifted individuals. To enhance parent effectiveness and to network community resources are major goals of this Network. More specifically, this Network will strive to meet the needs of gifted individuals by: 1) building partnerships with families, schools, businesses, industries, civic and service groups, helping professionals, and other communities; 2) facilitating education, assistance, and support for families of the gifted; 3) locating, developing, and disseminating relevant resources, programs, and materials; 4) assisting educators in working with gifted students, parents, families, and communities; 5) increasing public recognition of and support for the needs of the gifted; 6) linking gifted individuals with other gifted individuals in the wider community; 7) encouraging and assisting the development of local and state organizations to support gifted education; and 8) linking with other Networks and organizations to help fulfill common goals.



Do not train children to learning by force and harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each.

-- Plato