

## **Encouraging Motivation in Children**

*“What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge,  
and not knowledge in pursuit of the child.”*

—George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950)  
British playwright and novelist

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## Module 5.5

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### Understanding Parenting and Power

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## Encouraging Motivation in Children

### Materials

- Name tags
- Trifold parent handout, charts, activities, and other materials as specified
- Pencils
- Large pictures or posters of popular youth music groups, athletic events, teen fashions, bicycles, cars, or other areas of interest to children to be displayed as background for program
- Chalkboard

### References

- *Underachievement Syndrome: Causes and Cures* by Sylvia B. Rimm, Publisher: Apple Publishing Company, 1986
- *Kids Who Underachieve* by Lawrence J. Green, Publisher: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 1986
- *How to Help Children with Common Problems* by Charles E. Schaefer and Howard L. Millman, Publisher: Wiley, John & Sons, Inc., 1984
- *Understanding and Influencing Student Motivation* by Linnus S. Pecaut, Institute for Motivational Development, 1979

### Additional Readings for Parent Educators

- *Engaging Schools* by National Research Council, Publisher: National Academy Press, 2002
- *Bright Minds, Poor Grades* by Michael D. Whitley, Publisher: Perigee Trade, 2001
- *Empowering Underachievers* by Peter A. Sperak, Publisher: New Horizon Press, 2000

### Lesson Objectives

- Understand the concept of motivation
- Recognize the symptoms of lack of motivation in children and adults
- Develop parenting skills for encouraging motivation in children

### The Lesson

#### I. Introduction

**Group Activity No. 1 - Read Profile of an Unmotivated Child.**

## II. Instruction

*Profile of an Unmotivated Child* is a typical scenario of what is happening to many of our youngsters all across the nation. Studies indicate that as many as 15 to 40 percent of our nation's children fall into the category of the underachiever or the child who lacks motivation. The largest percentage of these children appears to be boys. The serious effects of poor motivation don't often surface until early puberty. This lack of achievement is fast becoming a nationwide concern; it robs children of motivation and a sense of personal control—it destroys family life.

Motivation is a feeling or an attitude of excitement. It is the ability to work against discouragement, to face competition and challenge, or to take on a task with determination and perseverance. Motivation can be stimulated by outside forces, but as it matures, inside forces produce much of the stimulus. Some researchers believe that age six is often a critical period in the development of motivation.

All healthy, normal infants are born with motivation. During infancy and the toddler stage, children are eager to learn, touch, and explore. It can be a full-time job just keeping up with their inquisitiveness and excitement to learn about their new-found world. Even older children and adolescents who appear to be unmotivated possess these characteristics. *Point to the pictures displayed in the background.* Most children show intense motivation towards special interests such as music, sports, clothes, or socializing. Their motivation in these directions can be filled with excitement and vitality. Unfortunately, too many of our young people are unable to direct this enthusiasm and energy into the areas we as parents would like for them to—mainly school and responsibilities. Where has the breakdown occurred? The reality is that the spirit of motivation probably didn't break down in a single incident or at a particular time in the child's educational development. Most likely it has been a series of incidents occurring over a long period of time.

*Referring to Profile of an Unmotivated Child, ask parents to analyze Branden's progression over the years and see if they can pinpoint some incidents that may have contributed to his problems in motivation today. Unmotivated children are generally discouraged children. Where did Branden become discouraged along the way? (Allow time for discussion.)*

Possible responses:

- ✓ Late birthday or lack of maturity when he started school
- ✓ Perceiving the intense concern of parents, teachers, and others through the years
- ✓ Anxiety created in the family
- ✓ Subtle—and perhaps not so subtle—messages about his lack of performance and failures
- ✓ Low self-esteem, lack of confidence
- ✓ Competition with peers, many of whom were significantly older
- ✓ Negative experiences

### III. Small Group Activity

*Break the class into two subgroups. Assign one group to list characteristics observed in motivated children and adults. Assign the second group to list characteristics observed in children and adults who lack motivation. When parents have had adequate time for interaction, ask one member from each group to record the characteristics on the board.*

The following are typical characteristics of children lacking motivation:

- ✓ Forgetfulness, losing or misplacing assignments and materials
- ✓ Making excuses
- ✓ Blaming others, complaining (teachers not fair, work too hard, not enough time, etc.)
- ✓ Giving up easily
- ✓ Unwillingness to attempt a task (You can't fail if you don't try! Many children are motivated to avoid failure and will go to great lengths to accomplish this goal.)
- ✓ Fear of failure
- ✓ Require constant reminding and prodding
- ✓ Lack of organizational skills
- ✓ Poor study skills
- ✓ Tasks done half-way
- ✓ No sense of direction (lacking goals)
- ✓ Manipulation (getting others to do tasks for them; making others feel guilty)
- ✓ Acting out
- ✓ Declining achievement test scores

Some children display all the above characteristics, and others may display only a couple.

Earlier the group looked at factors that might have discouraged Branden. Discuss how the following might also discourage a child:

- ✓ Interference by well-meaning adults. Adults often take the lead in learning situations rather than letting the child initiate the lead. For example, Josh becomes excited about the discovery of a spider spinning its web. Dad, rather than joining in the discovery and being an observer of both Josh's natural curiosity and excitement and nature's miracle, immediately begins a long, involved explanation of what is happening and proceeds to bring out the encyclopedia and science books to further explore the details of web-spinning. Although well-intending, Dad should have allowed Josh to take the lead and initiate the exploration and questioning.
- ✓ Enmeshment. Well-meaning adults frequently carry the burden of anxiety for the child or overprotect the child. When a child has parents and teachers and other well-meaning adults to carry all the anxiety of his or her learning problems, why should he be concerned? Or, if adults rush to his or her rescue, why should he or she put forth any effort?

- ✓ Inappropriate expectations. Sometimes parents place expectations so high that children are set up for failure or create expectations that meet the parents' needs rather than the children's. Expectations that are set too low may also discourage children. Expectations should be based on a child's developmental level, observations of the child, and awareness of the stresses and pressures of his or her environment.
- ✓ Criticism, verbal put-downs. Barraged by discouraging words, the child soon begins to see him or herself in this negative light.

All or any of the above factors can cause low self-esteem and turn children into discouraged learners.

*Ask parents to think carefully about their children's pasts and to try to list in the parent handout what they believe might have produced a lack of achievement. Some parents may wish to share their thoughts with the group.*

The cycle of underachievement can be broken, but parents must first understand where the breakdowns have occurred. If parents believe their children lack motivation, it is time to step back and carefully evaluate how they might have contributed to the situation. Our initial reaction is often, "It's the school's fault," or "The child is just lazy and not willing to put forth any effort." Although we would like to turn the situation around quickly and easily, one of life's most difficult realities is to recognize that we cannot change another person, not even our own child. We can bring about change, however, by the way we interact with that individual. Hard as it may seem, if we want to change the patterns of motivation, the change must begin with us. It is also important to remember that the child didn't reach this point overnight or in just one instance. Reversal may be a slow, tedious process. For the parent who is willing to put forth the effort, however, it is an investment in a discouraged child's future.

The Chinese have a saying: "The longest journey starts with a single step." This is where we must begin, setting realistic expectations for change not only for the child, but for ourselves as well.

If the change is to begin with us, it is critical to look at ourselves as role models. What messages about motivation, responsibility, and education are we giving our children? What part of our lives are the children observing? Although we may exhibit drive and motivation on the job or in community volunteerism, if we turn those characteristics off when we return home in the evening after a long, hard day, what are our children seeing? Our children should have the opportunity to observe the following in our daily lives:

- ✓ Effort and a sense of responsibility
- ✓ Respect and appreciation for education
- ✓ The ability to set goals
- ✓ Perseverance
- ✓ The ability to try again after failures
- ✓ Organizational skills

It is also important to provide other healthy role models for our children. Additional methods to encourage motivation in children:

1. Form a close teamwork alliance with the school.
2. Establish clear, consistent rules regarding school, homework, chores, etc.
3. Set reasonable goals and expectations for your child. Involve him or her in the establishment of these goals.
4. Emphasize effort and process; do not focus on end results. Use words of encouragement rather than words of praise.
5. Encourage intrinsic rewards. (“You must feel very proud of that test score,” or “I’ll bet you feel good to have your assignment completed ahead of time.”)
6. Help the child develop an “I can” attitude.
7. Keep yourself separate from the child; don’t enmesh. (*Demonstrate with Enmeshment Sheets.*)
8. Don’t rescue; expect the child to assume responsibility for his or her actions or lack of actions, or suffer the consequences.
9. Allow the child to take the lead in learning; support, but don’t interfere.
10. Don’t accept excuses for failure to carry out responsibilities or failure to do a job well.
11. Teach work ethics. Let the child know there are no substitutes for hard work. Many children grow up thinking there are shortcuts for everything and that things should come easily.

*Parents may wish to explore other more concrete ways of motivating children. Allow time for exchange of ideas.*

#### **IV. Closure**

*Encourage parents to concentrate this week on the messages they are providing regarding motivation through role modeling. Suggest that they guide their children toward an experience in which they will feel successful. Children need experiences that give them a lasting message of confidence. Confidence is not a constant, but during difficult or frustrating challenges it can provide encouragement.*

#### **Activities**

- Activity No. 1: *Profile of an Unmotivated Child*
- Activity No. 2: *Encouragement versus Praise*

#### **Handout**

- Handout No. 1: *Don't Give Up!*

#### **Complementary Modules**

- Module 5.3: *Giving Children Responsibility for Themselves*
- Module 5.6: *Developing Teamwork in a Child’s Educational Experience*
- Module 5.7: *Resolving Homework Issues*

#### **Suggested Reading for Parents**

- *A Mind at a Time* by Mel Levine, Publisher: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2003
- *The Month of Laziness* by Mel Levine, Publisher: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2003
- *Boosting the Adolescent Underachievers* by Victor Cogen, Publisher: Perseus Publishing, 2001

- *Could Do Better* by Harvey P. Mandel, Publisher: Wiley, John & Sons, Inc., 1996
- *Mega Skills* by Dorothy Rich, Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988
- *Homework Without Tears* by Lee Canter and Lee Hausner, Publisher: Harper Collins Publisher, 1988
- *Winning the Homework War* by Fredric M. Levine and Kathleen M. Anesko, Publisher: Prentice Hall Professional Technical Reference, 1987
- *Underachievement Syndrome: Causes and Cures* by Sylvia B. Rimm, Publisher: Apple Publishing Co., 1986
- *Kids Who Underachieve* by Lawrence J. Green, Publisher: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 1986
- *How to Help Children with Common Problems* by Charles E. Schaefer and Howard L. Millman, Publisher: Wiley, John & Sons, Inc., 1984

### **Suggested Reading for Children**

- *True Or False? Tests Stink* by Trevor Romain, Publisher: Free Spirit Publishing, 1999
- *Get Off My Brain* by Randall J. McCutcheon, Publisher: Free Spirit Publishing, 1999
- *How to Do Homework Without Throwing Up* by Trevor Romain, Publisher: Free Spirit Publishing, 1997
- *Middle School Study Skills* by John Ernst, Publisher: Teacher Created Materials, 1997

### **Suggested Parenting Quick Tips**

- *Early Allowances - Money Doesn't Grow on Trees*
- *It's Time To Make Some Rules*
- *Loving Learning: How to Motivate Kids*
- *Power Struggles...No One Wins!*