

Understanding Motivation in Kids

Motivation is a complex emotion. For many adults, it's a challenge to fully understand what motivates them from day to day. If you've tried, but not succeeded in maintaining a diet and exercise routine, or struggled to get out of bed in the morning, you will know how difficult it is to consistently tap into the intricacies of your own motivation. So imagine what it's like for kids. They are yet to develop the maturity and experience that we have, and yet we expect them to maintain consistent levels of motivation each day for superior results at school, in sports and at home. When it comes to motivation in kids, the key is helping them channel their motivation in the right direction.

We know that there are times when our kids appear to be completely demotivated. But the truth is, every child is motivated. All human behaviour stems from motivation. So when they are doing *something*, they are motivated.

On a day when your child appears lethargic or uncooperative, you might say "Nothing is going to motivate Andrew today". In fact, what you're actually saying is "Nothing that you do is motivating Andrew to do what you want him to do." So rather than asking yourself what you need to do to motivate Andrew, you might try asking yourself what motivates Andrew to do what he does?

Let's look at the case of Maggie as an example. At 11 years of age, Maggie is physically developed beyond her years. She is embarrassed to get changed for sports lessons at school because her body looks very different to her prepubescent classmates. She is also too self-conscious to tell anyone that she's embarrassed about this. She would rather crawl into a hole than bring up the issue with her parents or her teacher. Instead, Maggie finds ways to avoid school sports. She feigns illness. She misses the bus. Or she simply doesn't show. Her behaviour creates havoc every week. Her once positive image is now challenged by her sudden rebellious behaviour. Her parents and teachers may say that Maggie has lost motivation. They might try to motivate Maggie with the prospect of rewards or the threat of punishment. However, Maggie is already very motivated. Her primary motivation is to avoid embarrassment and it's likely that no threat or reward will supersede

her desire to avoid humiliation. But no one has figured that out yet, possibly not even Maggie.

And then there's Donovan. He's 8 years old and his parents are valiantly trying to encourage him to help out around the house. He has a simple list of chores. Take out the garbage, clean his room and pick up after himself. At the moment, his mum is working on a specific project with Donovan... she's trying to help him remember to replace the empty toilet roll with a new one should he be the person who finishes the roll. The frustration is palpable each time she glances into the bathroom and spots the empty toilet roll! Donovan's parents may say he's unmotivated to help out around the house. However, just like Maggie, Donovan is very motivated – to get back to his video game or construction set. Or perhaps he's motivated to simply avoid chores.

In both Maggie and Donovan's situations, they have motivation. It's simply misdirected. Our challenge as parents is to work out how to help them redirect their motivation in the most constructive way. In this way, we can find out what motivates their current behaviour and help them channel it as more constructive behaviour. This is easier said than done in many cases. For some kids, open discussions with their parents are comfortable and easy. For others, opening up to parents, teachers, or anyone for that matter, is extremely difficult. The challenges associated with these conversations also vary between age groups. As kids become more articulate, they may be better able

to identify and describe their drivers. However, as they get older, they may also become more private.

Be prepared to ask lots of questions in a sympathetic and supportive way. They may or may not have the understanding and the language to be able to explain it to you in one conversation. It may take a few discussions, with thinking time in between, for your kids to develop an understanding of what drives their behaviour. Once they have this understanding, you can work with them to devise a plan that will allow them to get what they want, while still functioning as a contributing member of their community.

Of course, there won't be one universal solution for every age group. Each circumstance will involve different emotions and require a different strategy and timeline. No doubt, it may also involve a few deep breaths on all sides! As parents and guardians, it's about asking the right questions in the right way, to get to the core of your particular situation. At the very least, you'll be talking to your kids. 💡

© Successful Minds – October 2010



e: info@successfulminds.com.au
w: www.successfulminds.com.au