

Raising Self-Motivated Children

By Kathy Seal, coauthor (with Deborah Stipek) of
Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning, on which this article is based

“When kids are interested in what they’re learning,” a teacher recently told me, “they go faster and farther.” He’s right—what could be more important than a child’s desire to learn? Indeed, as we explain in our book *Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning* (Henry Holt, 2001), research has shown that when students enjoy learning, they learn more, comprehend what they learn better, and remember it longer. They’re also more persistent and more eager to do challenging work.

Parents can have a tremendous effect on children’s desire to learn. However, they don’t always know how to provide encouragement, and they generally don’t have oodles of free time to devote to doing so. Here are some easy-to-implement, tried and true ways for parents to fire up a child’s eagerness to learn and to succeed in school.

Connect School Learning to the Real World

Although most children start school eagerly, research has found that American children’s love of learning declines steadily from third through ninth grade. Parents can help prevent that slide by showing children how school learning is relevant to daily life. The more kids see the connections between what they learn in school and what they experience outside of school, the more interest and pleasure they’ll take in learning. These connections can be made in several ways:

Share things in everyday life

Linking school to life can mean helping children apply knowledge to everyday tasks, like asking a child to help halve a recipe as you are baking cookies together. This gives a child concrete experience for understanding fractions. Similarly, explaining events in the community to children—in an age-appropriate way—helps them see the importance of social studies: “The city was able to open this community center,” you might say, “because grownups voted to spend the money on it.”

Talk about what children are learning in school

Parents can also breathe life into school learning by finding out what children are studying in school and then planning activities or initiating conversations that connect the topic to daily life. When a child is studying the weather, ask something like “I see dark clouds today—shall I take my umbrella?” “Why do dark clouds predict rain?” Young children often spontaneously share what they’re learning, but you can also ask the teacher what the class is covering this month or year.

Relate learning to family members and events

If a child is reading a picture or chapter book, talk about the book’s link to your own experiences or your child’s.

- “Is Olivia like anyone you know?”
- “That story reminds me of the time Daddy and I went to the seashore and there was a hurricane.”

These conversations also help develop a trusting relationship between children and parents, which provides the secure emotional base children need to thrive in school.

Give Children a Rich Array of Experiences

Diverse experiences offer many opportunities for learning and can increase children’s desire to learn in school. Family outings, even routine chores done together, can nurture children’s curiosity and help build their vocabulary.

Make the learning real

A visit to the lake or seashore, to a museum or farmer’s market gives children a broad base of knowledge that enhances what they learn in school and from books. A child who has seen the ocean will usually be more interested in reading about the ocean,

and will understand more of what is being read, than a child who hasn't. Even short conversations about a trip to the grocery or hardware store help build verbal and thinking skills. Children can in turn relate these lessons to what they are studying in school.

Expand on what children are learning at school

Use family outings to expand on school topics. For example, take children to the local museum or mission when the class is studying Native Americans. Is the class learning about conservation? Read your child a newspaper article about recycling, and have him or her separate household items to be recycled.

Here are some more ideas:

- When children are studying the earth and the solar system, watch a sunset together. Ask them what is happening—why is the sun disappearing?
- Ask a reluctant reader about a story or book being read in school, and start a conversation about how it relates to your experiences or the child's, or to your family's history: "Does that remind you of the time you met Jason for the first time, at church?" "Your grandfather came to America as a child, just like the people in your story." "Does that picture of the desert animals remind you of the camels we saw at the zoo?"
- If your child is having trouble getting interested in a measurement unit in math, work together on a simple craft, cooking, or sewing project that involves measuring.
- When children are studying American history, take them to a historic statue or monument in town and read the plaque on it. Explain what we celebrate on the Fourth of July and why we have holidays named after Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez.
- Rev up your child's interest in an agriculture unit by helping him or her cultivate an avocado pit held in a glass of water by toothpicks.

Help Children Feel Competent

Build on competence as a self-motivator

Nothing motivates children more than a feeling of competence. In fact, feelings of competence motivate adults, too. We all feel good when we figure out how to fix a leaky faucet, cook a great spaghetti sauce, or grow delicate roses. Learning something

new often feels so good we can't wait to do it again. When my coauthor, Stanford Education School Dean Deborah Stipek, learned how to record TV movies on a VCR while she was away from home, she was so pleased with herself that she practiced taping several movies she knew she would probably never get around to watching! That same feeling of satisfaction and pride motivates young children to learn. That's why we see toddlers practicing their newly developed skill of taking off their shoes over and over again.

Use encouragement instead of praise

Children usually know when they're competent at simple tasks like tying their shoes, but the older they get, the more feedback they need to recognize their skill development. Parents can help children feel competent by pointing out exactly what they've accomplished. Instead of general praise, which can sound empty and does not provide useful information, be precise in your encouraging statements. For example, "good job" doesn't help a child appreciate what he or she has learned, and it loses meaning when used for everything from clearing a plate off the table to making first chair in the clarinet section. On the other hand, "You finished the U.S. map. Tell me what the different colors mean" acknowledges what the child accomplished and gives him or her a chance to demonstrate what was learned in the process. Your interest is more encouraging than vague praise would be, and it invites more conversation as well.

As a writer, I'm not sure how to respond when people say, "What a nice book you wrote!" But if they say, "Your book was so funny! I loved the story about the dogs who thought they were cats," or "I had a problem with my son last night, so I used your advice about homework—and it worked!" then I'm getting feedback on exactly what was useful, and I can respond with greater interest and more detail.

Here are some examples of encouraging phrases that acknowledge children's achievements and make them feel competent about the skills they're acquiring. You'll find that your child is more likely to respond when you offer feedback like this than if you simply offer praise.

- "I can read every letter in your name!"
- "Now that you've been reading so much, I notice you are reading a lot faster than you used to, and still understanding what you read!"
- "You've really got the knack of subtraction now."

Help children when they get discouraged

No matter how much support and encouragement parents try to offer, children are still bound to feel incompetent and discouraged from time to time. Sometimes this is because they don't recognize their own role in success. "The work was easy," they'll say, or "I was lucky," or "The teacher helped me." Parents can build a child's confidence by pointing out his or her responsibility for the success:

- "You kept on working even after you were tired. Your persistence really paid off!"
- "It was your idea to choose that topic. The other students saw how interested you were when you gave your report and I bet that made them interested, too!"

When children are stuck on a task or activity, remind them of what they already know to restore their confidence and get them going again. That means returning to a part of the work the child was able to do. So if a child is struggling to tie a shoe, say "You got the lace through these three holes. Let's see if you can get it through the others the same way."

Avoid saying "That's easy"

When my own kids were young and couldn't do a task, I was often tempted to say "But that's easy." I had very good intentions; I thought that saying something was easy would encourage my children to keep trying. However, I've since learned that the opposite is true—if you're struggling with a task and someone says, "That's easy," you feel stupid and incompetent.

As Deborah—who used to do her own taxes—points out, how would we feel if we were struggling with our tax forms and a neighbor walked in and said, "Oh, that's so easy"? Wouldn't we like it better if our neighbor said, "Oh, yes, that's a hard one, but I figured it out eventually. Here, let me show you some tricks"?

This principle holds true with children. When they're struggling with schoolwork, validate the difficulty they're having: "Yes, fractions are not easy." Then give a constructive suggestion: "Do you want me to help you find the common denominator?"

Model Enthusiasm for Learning

Enthusiasm about learning is contagious, and we have to make sure our kids catch it from us. Reading books and magazines for pleasure and by choice sends the message that reading is fun, not just something that has to be done for school. Talking about something you enjoyed learning that

day at home or at work also shows children that learning is enjoyable. Even if you're a very busy parent, you can mention what interest you in a particular movie or on television, or in the magazine article you've read in the doctor's waiting room. Talk about your hobbies—be it jazz or photography or politics—while doing the dishes together or riding in the car. Most important, show interest in what your children find enjoyable. Ask questions, repeat the information they share to show you are listening, and look up information with them—in reference books, on the Internet—to show that you share in their love of learning.

Avoid Performance Pressure

Our society's emphasis on testing is bound to raise children's anxiety and make them feel that scores and grades are all that matter. Parents can minimize such worries by emphasizing learning over getting good scores. That means saying "Tell me about your science project" instead of "What grade did you get on your science test?" Focusing on learning rather than on testing actually helps children attain higher test scores in the long run.

Instead of focusing on the outcome of a test or class, call attention to how hard your child is working. "I expect you to try your best and learn as much as you can" creates much less stress than "I expect you to get all A's." That doesn't mean we don't want our children to get good grades. However, kids who focus on working hard are likely to perform better. In fact, research has found that students who think about learning more than about getting good grades not only enjoy school more and have greater motivation but also do better on tests than kids who concentrate only on their grades.

Another way to avoid pressuring children is to focus on their own progress rather than comparing them to siblings or friends. So rather than say, "Your brother is such a good reader. When he was your age, he read a book every week," try acknowledging a child's improvement:

- "You're reading with so much more expression now!"
- "Remember last week you could only add single numbers? Now you can add the double digits!"
- "I care about how much you're learning and improving, not about whether you read faster than Melissa."

When children try something new and fail, cheer their willingness to take on a challenge. Teach them to value their mistakes: "Let's look at what you got

wrong on your math test, and see if we can figure out what you're not understanding." Point out that kids who never make mistakes aren't learning anything new.

Give Children Some Control Over Their Work

Sometimes we are so eager for our children to learn and do well in school that we try to control the way they study and approach tasks. (Especially when a child isn't doing well, the natural response is to provide less freedom, not more.) But research has shown that children who have some choice and control are more enthusiastic about learning than kids whose parents always tell them exactly what to do, and when and how to do it. Children begin to internalize good study habits when given some control.

Obviously, this doesn't mean that parents should let children do whatever they please. But it does mean combining rules and responsibilities with some freedom to choose. In *Motivated Minds* Deborah and I call our method of mixing rules with choice "choice within a framework." Here's how that might be used to motivate a child to do homework. If the rule is that your child has to complete his or her homework every night, let your child choose the consequence for not doing it: "What do you think should happen if you don't finish your homework once?" "What should happen if you're not able to get it done several days in a row?" Want to motivate your child to read? If 8–8:15 p.m. is quiet reading time before bed, let your child choose what to read, whether it's something you read together or your child reads on his or her own.

Parents can also give children a sense of control by being nearby to help when needed but not hovering over children as they work. This conveys a confidence in children's ability to work independently; at the same time, children know that parents are available to offer support and encouragement when needed.

Help Children Feel Connected and Secure

A parent's trust, support, and understanding can greatly help a child enjoy learning. That's because a solid relationship provides a secure base from which children can explore the world and take on challenging work, knowing their parents will be there

for them whether they succeed or fail. And when the relationship is strong, children are more likely to trust what their parents say, share their values, and let them know when they need help.

Here are some final tips for maintaining the kind of relationship that will promote children's love of learning:

- Let children know you love them "no matter what." Don't base your affection on their school or other achievements.
- Support children's hobbies and passions—as long as they're safe and legal—even if they're different from your own. "Heavy metal isn't my thing, but I'll be happy to sign you up for drum lessons at school."
- Make your child feel understood. "I know how much you want to play outside right now, but we agreed that you would finish your homework first."

These are just a few of the many ways suggested in *Motivated Minds* for ensuring that your child both enjoys learning and succeeds in school. However, don't let our advice overwhelm you. If you can follow just a few of these suggestions—and can relax and enjoy these activities yourself—that's enough. Your child will know that you respect learning, and he or she will feel assured that learning can be fun.

Kathy Seal is coauthor of *Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning*, the *Los Angeles Times* bestseller that explains how to promote children's interest in learning. She has written for several publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Family Circle*, and has been a frequent commentator on Public Radio International's *Marketplace*. She lives in Santa Monica. **Deborah Stipek**, Ph.D., is the dean of the School of Education at Stanford University and an internationally recognized scholar. In addition to *Motivated Minds*, Stipek has published more than seventy articles and books on motivation. She formerly directed UCLA's Corinne A. Seeds University Elementary School, known worldwide as a laboratory for innovation in motivation. Dr. Stipek lives in Palo Alto.

If you'd like to learn more about helping children stay motivated to learn, see Stipek and Seal's book *Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning* (2001), published by Henry Holt. ■