

How Parents and Caregivers Influence Academic Motivation

Parents and caregivers can help their youngsters stay motivated and do well in their schoolwork. The main way that parents can contribute is by becoming actively involved in their youngsters' school experiences and by exhibiting a positive attitude toward their school accomplishments. Here are some common questions parents ask. The answers come from the studies of academic motivation that researchers have conducted.

1. How can I tell if my child is motivated?

Children are highly motivated if they want to learn, attempt learning tasks, stay engaged after beginning work, and exert a high degree of effort and persistence while learning, even if frustrated or anxious. In addition, they are highly motivated if they think doing their best at school is important, believe they can do the work well, and employ effective strategies to increase their chances of being successful.

2. How can I help my child feel that schoolwork matters?

The more your child sees that doing schoolwork is valuable, desirable, or attractive—and can think of a personal goal or purpose for doing the work—the more your child is likely to want to try his or her best. It is especially important that your youngster see himself or herself as the main beneficiary of doing well at school—for example, wants to do well to experience pride when performing school tasks. Your child's motivation is likely to be relatively low if he or she tries only to please you or to avoid getting punished.

3. Does the way I judge school success affect my child's motivation?

Your youngster is more likely to be motivated if you judge school success by the amount and duration of your youngster's effort and by the degree of progress or improvement he or she makes. Your youngster is likely to be less motivated if you judge school success by your youngster's ability to outperform others, achieve a particular grade, or receive positive judgments from others. Youngsters who focus on effort, improvement, and personal progress generally are more willing to take on academic challenges, continue to try even when faced with obstacles, and think less about the possibility of failure and embarrassment. Youngsters who focus on outperforming others and on getting favorable judgments from others are more likely to feel embarrassed and ashamed. In addition when faced with a difficult academic task, they are more likely to feel helpless and frustrated, and as a result, give up. Therefore, it is helpful to tell your youngster clearly what you consider success in doing schoolwork and to regularly compliment effort and personal progress.

4. How important is it for my child to believe that he or she is capable of doing schoolwork?

Youngsters generally answer the question "Can I do the work?" on the basis of their past history of school successes and failures. This information is then used to develop expectations, or predictions, about the likelihood of future school success. When youngsters feel capable of doing their schoolwork, they are more likely to be motivated and more likely to see their schoolwork as

having value. It is important periodically to ask your youngster how he or she feels with regard to the ability to do schoolwork, offer assistance, and discuss differences between your youngster's perceptions of his or her capabilities and your perceptions. Your child's beliefs about past school successes and failures are not based only on the objective results of school performance. How your youngster *interprets* these facts is also extremely important. For example, if your youngster has generally received passing grades but has been in a school with very high achievers, he or she may have gotten lower grades than other youngsters and feel discouraged and incapable. Encouraging your youngster to say how he or she feels about school performance is important and provides an opportunity for you to encourage your youngster to focus less on comparisons and more on personal progress. Having your youngster express feelings and focus on effort and personal progress are especially important when there is a poor match between your youngster's capabilities and the academic demands and support he or she is receiving. Your youngster has less control over attaining a "good" grade in these circumstances.

5. What effects do my attitudes about the value of schoolwork have on my child's motivation?

Your youngster's motivation is strongly affected by your attitudes and values toward school and schoolwork. The more importance you attach to schoolwork, the more likely your youngster will put forth effort and display interest in schoolwork. Youngsters usually judge the importance of schoolwork to their parents by their parents' knowledge about what they are doing in school and their parents' interest in school activities. In addition, students' motivation is likely to be higher the more they believe that their parents notice their efforts and any distress they may have when doing schoolwork. Interestingly, when youngsters feel that parents are concerned about their schoolwork, they are more likely to do their schoolwork on their own. Parent involvement with school activities also raises youngsters' motivation by making it more likely that youngsters will get extra help, when needed. As a result, they will feel less frustrated and defeated. Youngsters are more likely to ask for help with schoolwork—and are better able to cope when they experience academic failure—if parents show an interest in giving them the support they need.

6. How important is feedback to motivation?

How you evaluate and correct your youngster's schoolwork strongly affects his or her motivation. Your youngster's motivation is likely to be higher the more you maintain a positive focus—that is, when you highlight what your youngster is doing right and point out what he or she might do differently to improve. Your youngster's motivation is likely to be lower the more you focus on what he or she is doing wrong and continually point out errors. It is particularly helpful to praise positive outcomes that your youngster can achieve if he or she tries. These outcomes include displaying effort, persevering, and seeking help. On the other hand, your youngster's motivation is likely to be lower when you focus on things that your youngster cannot directly control, such as grades and academic standing in relation to others. In addition, praise is most likely to increase motivation if it is given as close in time as possible to a positive behavior; includes the details that led to the praise (so your youngster is clear about what he or she did right and believes you); highlights your youngster's role in the achievement (so your youngster can see how his or her actions have contributed to the positive outcome and knows how to reproduce the outcome); and emphasizes the benefits of the positive behavior to your youngster rather than to you (for instance, "You really worked hard studying for that math test. Now you know you can do this stuff when you try" rather than "I'm glad you did what I told you to do").

7. Is there a best way to tell my child to do schoolwork?

Your youngster is likely to be more motivated if you first invite him or her to express feelings about what is a reasonable expectation for school success and incorporate these views, if possible, when discussing what you expect in terms of school behavior. Your youngster is less likely to be motivated, on the one hand, if you use a controlling style and do not allow him or her any input in the discussion and, on the other hand, if you are overly permissive and do not define expectations, instead allowing the youngster to do whatever he or she wants. By defining clear expectations with your child's participation, you increase the chance that your child will feel more control over the outcome of schoolwork and as a result, will feel increased pride in achievement. Youngsters can, for example, be allowed input into such choices as when to begin schoolwork, which task they will start with, and how long they will work before taking a break.

8. Is it important to plan where my child will do schoolwork?

Your youngster's motivation is affected by where he or she does his or her schoolwork. Motivation is likely to be higher when you collaborate with your youngster and decide together what constitutes the best study space available. For example, together you can look for the place in the house that is quietest and most free of distractions. Because motivation is also affected by how neat and organized the study space is, you can also help increase and maintain your youngster's motivation by first providing assistance to organize the study space and make sure that your youngster has the necessary supplies and that these supplies are easily accessible. Finally, you can help ensure that the study space stays neat and organized by periodically doing a "checkup" and, as needed, encouraging cleanup and reorganization.

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