

Motivating Your Child

What to say, when to say it and when to keep your mouth shut

— by Sue Lyon-Boggs • illustration by James Forrest —

Books on education abound, but most of them involve checklists and ways to make better scores on tests. Educational games and toys are marketed on the promise of making children smarter. But the real key to educational success can't be bought: All the intellectual gifts in the world don't mean anything if a child doesn't care about learning.

So what's the difference between kids who love school and learning and those who don't even try to make good grades? "Anxiety undercuts all motivation," says Dr. John Leffingwell, chairman of the department of curriculum and instruction at UTA's School of Education. "Change can be a major cause of anxiety."

A child who has enjoyed learning and has been a strong student in the past might be derailed by a sudden trauma: her parents' divorce, a death in the family or the arrival of a new baby. For adolescents, puberty — with its enormous physical and social changes — can be overwhelming. "At this age, kids tend to blow things out of proportion," says Leffingwell. Only half-joking, he says, "If they have a pimple, they feel as though it will be written up in the *Dallas Morning News*. Clearly, today's math test is not going to be their first priority."

A more serious, ongoing lack of motivation, however, is more complex. Strategies for helping these kids care about school, say experts, all come back to one thing: listening to your child — with your head and your heart.



Attitudes Toward Learning and School

"School should be a priority," says Jill Gutbier, community education coordinator for the Parenting Center of Fort Worth. That sounds simple, but parents need to make sure that family routines include regular times for homework and reading. These things should come before television. School and learning also should be esteemed. If parents idolize only sports stars, they shouldn't be surprised if their kids don't think school matters.

At the other end of the spectrum are

parents who focus exclusively on grades.

Alison Gower teaches English at Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas. Fixating on making an A is negative for a couple of reasons, she says. First, it can make a child feel as if his worth is tied to grades, which is a recipe for low self-esteem. It's also an external motivation; he is doing it for others, rather than for himself. Gower adds that success in college and beyond comes for people who love to learn, rather than for those performing for the rest of the world. "Parents can't stand over kids and demand good grades forever. The motivation has to come from within."

The Parenting Center's class Encouraging Success in School warns against parents taking over and doing assignments for their kids. Gutbier says parents who do this want their kids to get good grades, but "all it does is undermine any sense of competency a child might have. It also absolves the child of any responsibility for their work. That can kill motivation pretty quickly."

Unfavorable Comparisons

Lisa Johannes, a sixth-grade Plano English teacher and winner of an Excellence in Secondary Teaching Award, says she shudders to hear a parent compare a child to a sibling who gets better grades. "If it's a comment made in passing to me, then I know it's what the child hears every day." Children compare themselves to siblings naturally and worry that parents love their other children more, especially if those siblings are high achievers. A child needs to be told often that you (her parent) love her for who she is — and simply because she is your child.

Another common pitfall is comparison to parental achievement. This, too, can come from either extreme. If a parent went to an Ivy League school and expects nothing less from his children, they can crumble under the pressure. Likewise, if a child hears, "I was a terrible math student, so you'll be bad at it, too," he will feel hopeless.

Dr. Deborah Diffily, assistant professor of early childhood education at Southern Methodist University, says the only healthy comparison for a child is to herself. Do all you can to show a child how far she's come. For example, Diffily suggests teachers keep writing samples from the first day of school. Then they can show them to the kids at, say, Thanksgiving: "The students are always amazed at how much they've advanced." This works especially well for young children, who might not remember they couldn't write their names three months ago.

Use Encouragement Freely; Praise Carefully; Rewards, Never

That focus on progress, rather than simply on results, is a big part of encouragement. "It's important that kids feel parents are behind them not just when they succeed, but also when they struggle," says Gutbier. "That means saying, 'You've worked hard to get that B average,' not, 'You should have gotten an A.'" Kids also learn from being coached through — not rescued from — a difficult assignment or semester. They will feel a well-deserved pride at overcoming their frustration and doing something well, and they will learn that persistence and hard work breed success.

Praise, in times of success, should be used cautiously. When you do praise your child, says Gutbier, make sure it's specific. This will make it ring true for your child. Rather than saying, "You're a great student," try, "You really worked hard researching and assembling that project. You must feel proud of that good grade."

Rewards for schoolwork, says Diffily, are a really bad idea, because they go against the notion that learning is intrinsically worthwhile. The best motivators, she asserts, are the sense that one is successful at something and that the work is meaningful.

Finding Their Own Way

For young children, a sense of pride and success are fairly easy to nurture, since most parents can coach them through trou-

ble spots in their schoolwork. Little kids also love to talk about their successes, giving parents lots of openings for encouraging words. It's probably too early for one activity to be more meaningful than all the others. The key at this age, says Diffily, is exposure to lots of different kinds of activities — art, music, sports and dance are good choices — while still leaving time for free play.

Around age 10 or 11, many kids start to show genuine interest in a particular activity or subject. Run with it — get books at the library, do Internet searches and take field trips. It's important that it is the child's genuine interest, rather than one imposed by the beliefs of parents or older siblings. By pursuing a passion, kids learn to find knowledge for pleasure and gain confidence by learning to do new things they find fun.

All of this will spill over into school, says Lisa Johannes, because it teaches kids that learning has relevance in their lives. Skills like reading, researching and even math are needed to pursue serious hobbies. And if kids are reading about magic tricks or collecting baseball cards, says Johannes, they are still reading — and enjoying it. Better than being forced to read what their parents might deem classics.

Teenagers' choices, of course, have higher stakes. Leffingwell says that anxiety still needs to be taken seriously by parents. He likens it to a baseball player's batting slump: Simply telling a stu-

dent to try harder, he says, only makes things worse. First, says Leffingwell, ask for information: "Don't assume negatives. Let your child tell you what she feels is happening. Then ask what you can do to help."

The most important question to ask after that, says Leffingwell, is "what can you [the child] do to change the situation?" This lets kids know you support them and, more importantly, that you feel confident that they can pull themselves out. "Ultimately, these kids need to find their own solutions to problems."

That is easier said than done, especially if a child chooses to pursue less education than his parents would like. Kids who decide to quit school altogether, says Leffingwell, need to know ahead of time that parents will expect them to get jobs instead. "Stand firm on that. When your child complains about the hours and the boredom, remind them that better jobs only go to those with education. Lots of these kids wind up going back to school."

For the child who chooses to delay college or to attend a less prestigious school, parents need to bite their tongues and let the young adult find his or her own way. Alison Gower relates a personal story from her own high school reunion: "Those kids who went into the high-profile professions because they were expected to be, by and large, not so happy. But those of us who had to wrestle with our own decisions feel the most satisfied with who we are." ♦

Dos and Don'ts

The kids who do best in school — and life — are those who have someone they can talk to about everything, without feeling judged. Below are some common negative tactics that limit communication, along with their positive counterparts.

WRONG

Yelling, threats, making child feel guilty

Comparing to siblings, classmates, parents

Linking parental love and approval to achievement

Criticizing school or teacher in front of your child

Focusing exclusively on grades

Choosing books and activities for child

RIGHT

Calm discussion to find solutions

Comparing child to herself; helping her see her own progress

Reassuring child you love him for who he is

Treating teacher and school as partners; working with them to solve problems and find challenges

Focus on content; find outside activities that make learning relevant and fun

Letting child choose his own reading and hobbies, then encouraging those choices