National Association of School Psychologists

Effective partners in the commitment to help school children and youth achieve their best. *In school. At home. In life.*

# Academic Motivation
# A Handout for Parents

**by Michael B. Brown, Ph.D., East Carolina University (NC)**
**and Patricia B. Keith, Ph.D., Alfred University (NY)**

## What is Academic Motivation?

A child who is academically motivated wants to learn, likes learning-related activities, and believes school is important. We want to help children develop a desire to do well in school because the children believe that learning is important and rewarding in their lives.

## Development of Academic Motivation

Children are naturally motivated to learn when they are infants. A baby's struggle to reach a toy, learn to walk, or eat without help are examples of motivation to learn. This early motivation to learn is later applied to school-related activities such as reading and writing. When children are not motivated to learn, it is because something has gotten in the way of their natural motivation. They believe that they cannot do well in school-related tasks, and they stop trying or do not try hard enough because they don't think that it will make a difference. They become easily frustrated and give up when learning is difficult. Since they stop trying, they do not learn successfully. They do not get to experience the thrill of learning something new. They believe that any success they have is due to luck or circumstance.

Why do children develop these negative beliefs? Sometimes it is because of things that affect their *ability* to learn. Learning disabilities, difficult temperament, developmental delay, depression, or chronic life stress may make it harder for a child to learn in school. Children who have failed in school before are also very likely to stop trying to learn because they develop the belief that they cannot do so. The *attitudes* of adults can also influence children's beliefs about their academic success. Parents who have standards that are unrealistic can discourage their children's efforts. Competition in school (where someone always wins and someone always loses) can be very discouraging to children, especially those who may never be "the best" at school, even though they can learn a lot. Children who don't experience success or whose successes are not recognized may develop poor academic motivation. Children whose parents or peers do not think school is important or do not place importance on doing their best in school also can develop poor academic motivation.

## Increasing Motivation to Learn

There are many things that parents can do to increase their child's academic motivation. Keeping good parent-child relationships and letting your child know that you think school is important can enhance academic effort. You can also help by

teaching your child good study habits and providing recognition for his or her successes. Working as a partner with your child's teacher is also important. Here are some ideas to help you increase your child's motivation to learn:

· Be firm and fair when you discipline your child. Children need reasonable discipline to be independent and responsible.

· Teach your child to be responsible at home. Chores and expectations for proper behavior are ways of developing self-discipline that can transfer to school-related learning.

· Work hard to have a good parent-child relationship. Take time to do fun things with your child. Listen when your child talks to you, especially about school.

· Do family activities that encourage learning, such as visits to the library, museums or parks.

· Let your children know that you think learning is important and is the central purpose of school.

· Provide opportunities for successes. Children who feel successful are more likely to try new things.

· Talk with your children about your interests and likes.

· Help your children identify things that they enjoy and what they do well. Capitalize on their interests to build learning experiences. For instance, if your child likes baseball, you can encourage your child to read and write about baseball players or the history of baseball.

· Talk with your children about school and show an interest in their school activities.

· Talk with your children about their career interests and how school is related to a career.

· Be sure to praise your children for trying hard and for being successful. All children need to know when they are doing well.

· Balance praise and punishment when you are helping your child. Too much punishment can be discouraging. Make sure your child knows what is expected and gets some kind of recognition. Remember, rewards don't always mean getting money or privileges. Just telling your children that you are proud of them or you notice the effort they put into their work will make a big difference.

**Teach Habits that Encourage Learning**

· Have a set routine for school work. Your child should know when he or she is expected to work on their school work each day.

· Set up a place to study where your children have the needed supplies and as much quiet as necessary.

· Make sure your children finish school work at home before doing things that could distract them from doing their school work.

**Work with Your Child's Teacher**

· Show your child that you respect his or her teacher. Don't handle disagreement with the teacher in front of your child.

· Talk regularly with the teacher so that each of you know what is going on in school and at home. Waiting until report cards come out is often too late to make changes.

· Work with your child's teacher to make sure your child learns good study skills.

· Develop a system to give reinforcements at home for working hard in school.

**If Your Child is Already Having Problems with Academic Motivation**

· Talk with your child about the problem. Is he or she feeling confused or frustrated by the work? Does your child feel that he or she is trying hard to do well?

· Talk with your child's teacher to identify areas in need of improvement.

· Let your child know that you are willing to help them do better.

· Help your child identify things he or she does well so that the focus is only on areas of difficulty.

· Help your child identify things that he or she likes that could be used to help with school work (for example, if a child is interested in animals, have him or her read books about animals, make up stories about animals, etc.).

· Reward effort and productivity.

· Provide increased rewards for improvement.

· Limit things that interfere with learning, such as excessive TV, video games, computer time, etc.

· Increase the amount of time your child studies each day by a small amount 5-10 minutes until you reach a reasonable goal (such as an additional thirty minutes per day).

**Get More Help if Necessary**

· Talk with your child's teacher, school counselor or school psychologist for help and advice. If there is reason to suspect an educational disability, request a comprehensive assessment from your school's special education team.

· Often, there are parents groups or PTA groups that can help you or provide support.

· Find out if instruction in study skills is available at your child's school.

· Don't be afraid to seek counseling or other help outside of school if necessary.

**Resources for Parents**

Brown-Miller, A. (1994). *Learning to learn: Ways to nurture your child's*

*intelligence*. New York: Plenum Press.

Clark, L. (1996). *SOS: Help for parents (2nd Edition)*. Bowling Green, KY: Parent's Press.

Levine, M. E. (1994). *Educational care*. Cambridge, MA: Educators Publishing Service.

Martin, M. , & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (Eds.) (1995). *Solving your child's school-related problems.* New York: HarperPerenniel.

Rimm, S. (1996). *Dr. Sylvia Rimm's smart parenting: How to raise a happy, achieving child*. New York: Crown Publishers.

**© 1998 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda MD 20814 301-657-0270.**

*School professionals and organizations (e.g., the PTA) can print the fact sheets individually for hard copy distribution. However, all fact sheets must be disseminated in the **original form** with the **NASP logo** and the information credited to NASP, whether in print or online format.*