

The Challenges of Motivating Children

by Kathy Slattengren

How can we motivate our children to work harder in school, in a sport or in practicing an instrument? Will the promise of a reward for practicing the piano help our child practice more? Or will the threat of punishment be more effective? When we try to motivate our children to work harder, we can often end up feeling frustrated by the results.

Understanding Internal Motivation

Ideas about motivation are changing as new research teases out some of the key elements. According to Daniel Pink's latest book, [Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us](#), trying to motivate children using external rewards and punishment is a mistake. The secret for motivating children to high performance lies in allowing their own internal drive to direct their behavior.



Pink describes three elements of true motivation:

- **Autonomy** - the need to direct our own lives
- **Mastery** - the desire to make progress in our work
- **Purpose** - the ability to positively impact ourselves and our world

For example, if you want your child to practice the piano more, try allowing her to choose when to practice, what music to focus on and where to perform that will bring delight to someone else.

Trying to Control Too Much

When we try to motivate our children, it sometimes backfires as they dig in their heels and refuse to buckle under the pressure. By attempting to exert control over our children's behavior, we are reducing their autonomy - one of the key elements of internal motivation.

One mom was describing her frustration in getting her daughter to practice the piano. No matter how hard she tried her daughter sat on the piano bench refusing to put her fingers on the keys. This is a typical control battle and one that mom is likely to lose since her daughter ultimately controls what she does with her fingers!

How do we know when we've stepped over the line and are trying to control too much of our children's behavior? Luckily children are pretty good at letting us know when we've stepped over that line. If you hear your child saying any of the following, you're probably over the line:

- "You're not the boss of me!"
- "I'm not going to do that!"
- "You can't make me."
- "Why do you always get to choose?"

At this point it is wise to take a step back and look at what we are trying to accomplish and consider other approaches.

Motivating to Perfection

Psychologist Robert W. Hill of Appalachian State University found that when people are trying hard

because of their own desire for excellence, this effort can lead to greater satisfaction and mental health. However, if the pressure to perform is coming from others, it's likely to lead to dissatisfaction and reduced well-being.

In the article "[The Two Faces of Perfection](#)", Hill is quoted as saying

"Kids need to get the message, 'You need to have high standards, but you don't need to be perfect.' If you have unreachable goals and you're constantly dissatisfied with yourself, you can be miserable. Unequivocally, you don't want a parent who is constantly criticizing, so the child develops a self-scrutiny that always finds fault with their own performance."

While we all want our children to try hard and make good choices, in order to accomplish this we need to allow them to practice making those choices. Some of the choices they make will not be so good and that will give them an opportunity to learn from their mistakes.

By giving our children the chance to develop their self-motivation, we encourage them to grow and find their own internal strengths.

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