

Increasing Motivation Using Provocative Questions

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Do you wish you could increase your children's motivation to do homework, get ready for school on time or keep their room clean? Will the promise of a reward for practicing the piano help your child practice more? Or will the threat of punishment be more effective?

When you try to motivate your children to work harder, you often end up feeling frustrated by the results.

Understanding Internal Motivation

New research is teasing out some of the key elements around motivation. According to Daniel Pink's 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 encouraging their own internal drive.

Pink describes three elements of true motivation:

- **Autonomy:** the need to direct your own life
- **Mastery:** the desire to make progress in your work
- **Purpose:** the ability to positively impact yourself and the world

For example, if you want your child to practice the piano more, asking these questions might help.

- **Autonomy:** When do you want to practice? Do you want to practice alone or with someone listening?
- **Mastery:** What music are you excited to learn next?
- **Purpose:** What do you like most about playing the piano? Is there someone you'd like to play a song for?

These questions encourage her to look inward to tap into her own motivation.

Trying to Motivate Your Kids

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

One mom described 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 which mom is likely to lose since her daughter controls what she does with her fingers!

How do you know when you've stepped over the line and are trying to control too much of your children's behavior? Luckily kids are pretty good at letting you know! If you hear your child saying any of the following, you're 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 consider other approaches.

Using Provocative Questions To Trigger Motivation

You can ask questions that guide your kids to articulating their own motivation. Let's pretend your child is not working hard on homework. You could ask "On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being you absolutely will not do your homework to 10 being you're excited to get your homework done, what number are you?" Since your child is struggling with homework, you expect a low number.

If your child answers with two, you then ask "Why did you choose two and not one?" This encourages your child to name what is providing some motivation. It might be that he wants to pass the class, not disappoint his teacher or not miss recess. Recognizing these factors can empower your children to own what is in it for them.

If your child answers with one, you can then ask "What would it take to make it a two?" This guides your child to consider what would increase his motivation.

Asking these questions helps your children tap into their own desire to succeed. These types of questions are part of the motivational interviewing technique. You can watch a [video of Daniel Pink describing how to use motivational interviewing with a teenager](#) who is refusing to keep her room clean.

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.

"[The Two Faces of Perfectionism](#)" article quotes Hill, "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 you want your children to try hard and make good choices, in order to accomplish this they need to practice making 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 your children the chance to develop their self-motivation, you encourage them to grow and find their own internal strengths. Tapping into their internal motivation will give them the power to reach their dreams!

Kathy Slattengren is an internationally recognized, inspirational parent educator and founder of Priceless Parenting, <http://www.PricelessParenting.com>. Priceless Parenting offers online [parenting classes](#), [parenting presentations](#) and [parent coaching](#). Parents learn to effectively handle misbehavior while building loving relationships. © Priceless Parenting, LLC