**What Motivates Your Child (7 Steps To Effectively Motivate Kids)**

In this article, you are going to learn what motivates your child and how to effectively motivate kids using 7 backed-by-research steps.

We will also look at what motivation really is and how many types of motivation there are. **You’d be surprised not all motivations are created equal.**

**What Type Of Motivation Does Your Child Have**

Motivation is the reason that underlines behavior.

In psychology, there are two main types of motivation: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation.

[**Intrinsic motivation**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/intrinsic-motivation/) refers to doing an activity for its inherent enjoyment rather than for a separable outcome.

[**Extrinsic motivation**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/extrinsic-motivation/) refers to doing an activity, not for its inherent enjoyment but instead for a separable outcome.

Although these two types of motivations may result in similar behavior, there are [**differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/difference-between-intrinsic-and-extrinsic-motivation/).

Studies have shown that when people engage in an activity out of intrinsic motivation, the quality of engagement and the results are both better​1​.

For example, in one study at the University of Rochester, researchers asked a group of undergraduate students to read an article and then record their emotions reading it.

One week later, they tested the students’ ability to recall the information.

Students who found the article interesting or enjoyable scored better in recalling and comprehending the information, even after accounting for their differences in verbal aptitude.​2​

Report this ad

Research has confirmed that intrinsic motivation, i.e. enjoying the activity itself, is preferable over extrinsic motivation.

**What Motivates Your Child And What Does Not**

So, what can you do to motivate your child?

Many of us use the “carrot and stick” approach, such as prizes or [**behavior charts**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/behavior-chart-chore-chart/), when it comes to motivating our kids.

If you have tried that and you’re still reading this article, chances are you have not found much success with that strategy.

Here is why…

First, when children are responding to the “carrot and stick”, they are acting on extrinsic motivation.

We’ve already seen that the quality of behavior resulting from extrinsic motivation is not as good as intrinsic motivation.

On top of that, you usually have to keep using the carrot and stick for the behavior to continue.

In most cases, that is simply not sustainable.

But there is a third reason…

Using carrot and stick actually reduces intrinsic motivation in kids, if there is any at the beginning.

Many studies have shown that when rewards or a controlling factor is introduced, a person’s intrinsic motivation decreases.​1​

In other words, if your child has some interest in an activity, your carrot-and-stick “motivation” will actually backfire and demotivate your child.

For intrinsic motivation to appear, a child has to enjoy an activity for its pure enjoyment.

Rewards, praises, and punishment will not inspire someone to become intrinsically interested in the activity.

It does the exact opposite.

Does that mean that our hands are tied and there is nothing we, the parents, can do?

Not really.

There are actually A LOT we can do to help our children succeed (more on that later).

**How To Use Extrinsic Motivation**

If your child is not intrinsically motivated or if their intrinsic motivation is not enough, we then have to work with their extrinsic motivation.

Fortunately, not all extrinsic motivations are bad.

There are four types of extrinsic motivation.

They lie on a spectrum of autonomy, from the least autonomous (aka externally regulated) to the most autonomous (aka integrated).

Among these four extrinsic motivations, integrated motivation is the most desirable type.

**Integrated** motivation results when people have **fully identified and assimilated a cause to the self**.

So what does that mean?

That means a person has examined the cause and found it to agree with their own values and needs, i.e. they have **internalized a cause**.

They then become self-determined and behave autonomously, producing better results.

Because integrated motivation has many similar qualities as intrinsic motivation, **helping children internalize a behavior so that they become integrated is *extremely important***.

**7 Backed-By-Research Steps To Effectively Motivate Your Child**

The following are what decades of research have proven to help enhance intrinsic and integrated motivation.

**1. Stop trying to motivate (the traditional way)**

Your attempts to motivate your child are most likely doing the exact opposite — demotivating your child.

To be intrinsically motivated is to enjoy an activity on its own.

If someone doesn’t enjoy an activity, no amount of pushing, bribing or threatening can make them start to like it for its **pure enjoyment**.

So the traditional ways parents use to motivate — rewarding, praising, nagging, scolding and punishing — is *counterproductive*.

**2. Be inspiring instead of controlling**

Rewarding, praising, nagging, scolding and punishing are ways to control someone’s behavior.

Controlling a child cannot motivate her intrinsically because you are applying pressure or offering an incentive that is separable from the activity itself.

The opposite of being controlled is being **autonomous**, which means [**self-initiating one’s own actions**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/how-to-get-kids-to-listen/).

Being autonomous is an *essential* condition for intrinsic or integrated motivation.

Studies have shown that having a sense of autonomy can enhance a person’s intrinsic motivation.

For instance, when students are free from pressure to learn, they show higher quality learning, better conceptual understanding, and longer retention.​1​

On the other hand, when students feel controlled or that they are studying for a different reason other than enjoying the learning itself, their intrinsic motivation decreases.​3​

So to effectively motivate your child, you should aim to inspire, not to control.

The best way to inspire is by showing the beauty in an activity itself and how one can enjoy doing it.

For example,

* Show children that learning a new skill and mastering it is fun.
* Pique their curiosity in a new skill by showing them the different uses of it.
* Let children choose among activities without pressure.
* Celebrate success milestones together (but do not over-praise or [**praise conditionally**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/words-of-encouragement-for-kids/)).
* Be supportive, provide constructive feedback that can enhance a sense of competence and do not criticize.
* When children are stuck at a problem, help them view it as a “challenge they can conquer”, not a “difficulty they need to overcome”.
* Do not refer to the activity as children’s “job”.
* Do not use a break from the activity, such as “No homework”, as a reward.

**3. Help them internalize and become integrated**

Some activities do not lend themselves well to enjoyment.

If that’s the case, help your kids become integrated.

Help them identify why an activity is important and help them internalize the need for it.

Children must **grasp the meaning and worth** of doing something to fully internalize it.

For example, training for soccer can be hard at times.

But practicing is a critical and necessary part of achieving mastery.

Explain and help your child understand that if they want to be good at soccer, they need to practice even when it’s sometimes not very enjoyable.

**4. Help them decide and let them decide**

As mentioned before, autonomy is crucial in creating intrinsic motivation or integrating extrinsic motivation.

Children need to be able to make their own decisions to feel a sense of autonomy, even when you disagree with the decision because **self-determination** is one of the most important intrinsic motivators.​4​

Many parents are afraid that if they let their children make their own decisions, kids will inevitably make the wrong ones and fail.

But just as falling is an inevitable part of learning to walk, making wrong decisions is an inevitable *and* important part of learning to make good decisions.

If the activity is not health- or safety-related, let them decide, with your guidance, and then let them face the natural consequence.

For example, if a child [**refuses to do his homework**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/how-to-get-your-kindergartener-to-do-homework/), even after you explain the importance of it, let him face the consequence in school.

If something is not health- or safety-related but you have a strong desire for her to engage, it is important to ask yourself why you want it so much.

There are things children must do, such as going to school, which is not negotiable. (If a child doesn’t want to go, find out the reason why. Are there bullies in school? Are the teachers mean? Become their advocates and work with the school to remove those obstacles.)

But there are things only *we* believe children must do, but they actually don’t have to.

Children are not meant to live our lives.

Just because we regret not playing the piano when we were young doesn’t mean our kids need to fulfill *our* dreams.

Children have their own lives and their own dreams to pursue.

**5. Find an optimal challenge**

One of the best ways to inspire intrinsic motivation in children is to help them feel a **sense of competence**.

If an activity is too easy, a child will feel bored quickly.

But if an activity is too hard, a child will feel discouraged.

An optimal challenge is one that is slightly more difficult than what a child has already mastered, but is still achievable through practice and some hard work.

It is also important to help children gain a **growth mindset**.

Having a growth mindset means believing that our “talent” is malleable. Skills and mastery can **improve through practice and hard work**.

Help and encourage your kids to practice.

Report this ad

When they finally master a new skill, that sense of competence will become **their biggest internal motivator**, setting their path to success.

**6. Grow relatedness through authoritative parenting**

Because the extrinsically motivated activity is often not inherently interesting, the primary reason children are likely to engage in it, is that the behavior is valued by people they feel connected to.

Science tells us that a sense of **belonging and relatedness** can facilitate internalization.​5​

Relatedness refers to the emotional and personal bonds among individuals.

That means children are more likely to internalize a cause valued by someone they feel related to or they have bonded with.

The importance of relatedness has been extensively studied in education due to its significance in students’ performance.

In the classroom, when students feel **respected and cared for** by the teacher, they are more intrinsically motivated to learn.​6​

Relatedness with parents is particularly important in kids’ motivation.

At home, relatedness is developed through **secure and satisfying connections** between parents and their children.

It comes as no surprise that when you have bonded with your child, they are much more likely to listen to you, adopt your value and be motivated to engage in activities you deem important.

So how do you bond effectively with your child?

Studies show that parents who adopt an [**authoritative parenting style**](https://www.parentingforbrain.com/authoritative-parenting/) bond with their children more.

These are parents who are warm and responsive to their children’s needs. They also have high standards and set limits for their kids.

Psychologists find that authoritative parents create an autonomy-supportive environment that can increase their children’s self-regulation and motivation in classrooms.​7​

An autonomy-supportive environment is one in which parents value autonomy in their children. They encourage kids to choose and participate in solving problems. The home climate is democratic rather than autocratic.

**7. Get involved**

Another way to promote relatedness is parents getting involved in the activity and demonstrating how much they value that.

For instance, one of the most reliable predictors of children’s school performance is the level of parental involvement in their kids’ learning.​8,9​

There are many ways you can get involved.

In sports, you can coach the activity or practice together with your kids.

In school, you can volunteer in the class. Or you can get involved in other learning activities such as reading to them every night, helping with school projects, or doing homework exercises together.

Keep in mind that getting involved doesn’t mean controlling.

Autonomy is still necessary to motivate your children.

**Final Thoughts On Child Motivation**

Never giving our kids rewards can be hard. Sometimes, we just want to give our children something to celebrate their success. The key is not using it as a contingency, i.e. ***if*** you do this, ***then*** you get this. Any extrinsic rewards should be unexpected, offered only after the activity finishes and not routinely given (because then your kids will start to expect them). You can also offer praise, positive feedback or improvement suggestions in place of tangible rewards. All of these can motivate your child for **future tasks**.

<https://www.parentingforbrain.com/what-motivates-your-child/>

Questions

1. If you are a parent, and see something undesirable in your kid, what do you do?
2. Do you think smartphone or computer game is good for your kid? How do you control it?
3. Do you think youtube and television are good for your kid? How do you control them?
4. Does your kid like or dislike sports? How do you control it?
5. Does your kid like to read? How do you encourage it?
6. Does your kid like English? How do you encourage it?
7. Is your kid too distracted or noisy? How do you control it?
8. Does your kid lie? How do you control it?
9. Is your kid easy to be angry? How do you control it?
10. If your kid does not want to do something that you want, how do you control it?
11. If you have two or more kids, and when they fight, do you say the younger one must respect the elder one? Or do you say the male (or female) must respect the female (or male)?

Next Questions

1. What motivates your kid?
2. What motivates you?
3. What motivates your spouse?
4. What motivates your boss?
5. What motivates your underlings?
6. You are the leader and boss in your family. Is your leadership style different between home and the workplace?