

Session 5

How to Promote Self-Determination

OBJECTIVES

Parents will:

- ♦ Increase their understanding of the positive association between self-determination and motivation.
- ♦ Increase their knowledge of ways they may enhance a child's sense of self-determination.
- ♦ Understand how highlighting relevance and self-interest may positively affect motivation.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

Not surprisingly, children who willingly engage in an activity are likely to have higher levels of motivation, compared with children forced to engage in an activity. When children choose to achieve a goal, they are more likely to do the following (Deci, 1985):

- ♦ View the goal as important
- ♦ Initiate action to achieve it
- ♦ Exert a high level of effort
- ♦ Appropriately regulate actions and emotions while working
- ♦ Persevere in the face of challenges
- ♦ Monitor performance until achieving the goal

In addition, children who willingly engage in a learning activity are more likely to believe the activity has some degree of personal usefulness and relevance and that they can complete it successfully

through their own efforts (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Even minor choices, such as choosing when to begin working and which homework assignment to do first, are likely to increase a sense of self-determination and motivation.

Encouraging Self-Determination as a Motivator

Parents can enhance a child's sense of self-determination in a number of ways (Reeve & Jang, 2006):

- ♦ Tuning in to the child's needs and interests
- ♦ Listening to help identify and articulate—as clearly and completely as possible—these needs and interests, as well as the particular outcomes the child is interested in achieving
- ♦ Resisting the urge to impose their own agenda, interests, and goals on the child
- ♦ Helping the child design, select, and implement strategies to achieve self-determined goals
- ♦ Supplying any needed resources to implement the strategies the child has selected

In contrast, unfortunately, parents may diminish a child's sense of self-determination in these ways:

- ♦ Insisting that a child subscribe to the parents' own agenda, interests, and goals (e.g., selecting a topic the parents think is of interest and directing the child to work on this topic)
- ♦ Supplying a child with solutions or answers
- ♦ Minimizing a child's sense of choice by employing “ought,” “should,” and “must” statements when discussing a school activity
- ♦ Telling the child what the standard of success must be

When parents dictate what a child should do, how it should be done, and how success is to be defined, the child is less likely to see the task as valuable or important and, as a result, less likely to be motivated to perform the task.

Parents often feel forced to coerce their children to try when they are significantly unmotivated—for example, when they are repeatedly stating that they do not care about homework or that homework is boring and irrelevant. At such times, parents tend to be at a loss as to how to persuade their children to expend effort. Typically, then, they try to force compliance with dictates and demands or with threats of punishment in the hope of intimidating their children. Generally,

these “external” attempts to motivate children fail in the face of the lack of “internal” motivation.

An alternative approach is to focus on increasing a child’s sense of self-determination and presenting a rationale or verbal explanation highlighting the relationship between the child’s self-interests and the need to do schoolwork. When explanations focus on the child’s interests, the child is more likely to view doing schoolwork as a choice and is therefore more likely to feel invested in the activity. Parents know it is difficult to be empathetic after struggling with a child to do schoolwork. Yet parents are more likely to enhance motivation if they convey an appreciation of the child’s point of view and acknowledge any negative or positive feelings he or she is experiencing. At the same time, parents should highlight the potential value or usefulness of the school task—for example, by saying, “I see you are upset about having to do this math work. If you do it, though, it will help you when you use your telescope. Also, your teacher will be impressed by the change in your behavior and give you a grade you’ll be proud of.”

Supporting Initiative as a Motivator

Once parents succeed in encouraging chronically unmotivated children to try, their children may need further assistance. Help may take many forms, and as long as the help empowers their children over time to take more and more personal responsibility, parents should offer it. For example, parents may need to guide their children in the planning and monitoring of homework. To further encourage a sense of choice and control, it is helpful to give children as much responsibility as possible to develop a plan. Parents can then build on the plan and be in a position to act as consultants, not directors. For example, parents might ask their children to propose a reasonable timetable in which they will complete the work and a way the parents can be reassured it is being done. If a proposed plan seems unreasonable, parents should attempt to negotiate a more reasonable plan, proposing alternatives and making compromises so their children continue to feel some sense of choice and control over the outcome.

Research shows that increased feelings of self-determination are positively associated with increased academic motivation. Relatively high levels of autonomy are significantly and positively associated with the following:

- ♦ Relatively high levels of intrinsic motivation (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989)

- ♦ Positive attitudes toward studying, better concentration, and deeper processing of academic material (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004)
- ♦ Higher achievement and feelings of competence and self-esteem (Wong, Weist, & Cusick, 2002)
- ♦ Increased self-regulation, enjoyment, and persistence (Kelly, Brownell, & Campbell, 2000)

As mentioned earlier, research has revealed a positive association between providing children with a rationale related to their own interests and increased academic motivation. Children presented with a rationale display relatively higher levels of effort, are more engaged, and show greater persistence, presumably as a result of feeling they have chosen to perform the school activity (Reeve, Jang, Hadre, & Omura, 2002; Reeve & Jang, 2006).

MATERIALS

Copies of the following:

Session 5 Vignettes

Session 5 Parent Knowledge Base

White board or chart paper (*optional*)

SESSION PLAN

1. Review the Session 4 homework. Ask for several volunteers to describe (a) what conclusions they formed in regard to their children's progress and (b) the extent to which the report card and the standardized test results were consistent. Highlight, when possible:
 - ♦ Using effort as a marker of progress, rather than a particular grade or score
 - ♦ Needing to individualize expectations
 - ♦ Considering whether external factors (e.g., stress, a poor relationship with a teacher) may be affecting progress
2. Ask participants:
 - ♦ Remember when you went to elementary or middle school. How much freedom or choice did you have in deciding how hard you wanted to work at your homework? How you carried out school assignments? How successful you ought to try to be?

- ♦ How did your parents try to influence or control these choices?
 - ♦ How did your parents' attitudes and actions make you feel?
 - ♦ How did these attitudes and actions affect your motivation?
 - ♦ In retrospect, do you feel your parents' approach was helpful or unhelpful?
3. Hand out the Session 5 Vignettes. Ask for volunteers to take turns reading portions of Vignette A. Ask participants the following questions:
- ♦ What do you think about Steve's approach to selecting the topic?
 - ♦ What are some alternative ways a parent might include a child in carrying out a school task to increase a sense of self-determination?
 - ♦ Do you believe there is a relationship between Steve's controlling and critical manner and Elisa's lack of enthusiasm and mediocre grades? Why or why not?
 - ♦ How might you try to increase Elisa's enthusiasm and grades?
(*For example, encouraging choice and including her personal interests; allowing her as much opportunity as possible to do a task in her own style; creating fair, appropriate expectations that focus on effort and relative progress*)
4. Ask participants:
- ♦ Think of times in the past month when your child was either unenthusiastic about, or refused to do, homework. How did you try to persuade your child to do the work?
 - ♦ Was your attempt at persuasion successful or unsuccessful? Why do you think you got the outcome you did?

On the white board or chart paper, list parents' various attempts to persuade and encourage participants to rate their relative effectiveness.

5. Ask volunteers to take turns reading portions of Vignette B. Ask:
- ♦ What are the critical pieces of information we should examine?
(*For example, the mother's overwhelmed state; Tyler's lack of interest; his refusal to accept adult authority; the idea of providing a meaningful and relevant rationale related to an individual's self-interest; and the importance of choice, empathetic communication, and negotiation*)
 - ♦ What are some ways you could use the information in the vignette to increase Tyler's motivation?

6. Set up a role-playing activity. Play the part of Tyler and ask for volunteers to take turns role-playing Mr. Gilbert, using some of the ideas the group has generated. After each round of role-playing, ask:
 - ♦ What did you do well? What might you have done differently?
 - ♦ What feedback do the rest of you have?
7. Give each parent a copy of the Parent Knowledge Base for the session. Refer parents to the homework assignment at the end of the handout, answer any questions they may have, and encourage them to complete the assignment. Let parents know that the group will be discussing the results at the next session.

Promoting Your Child's Self-Determination

When children choose to achieve a goal, they are more likely to:

- ♦ View the goal as important.
- ♦ Initiate action to achieve it.
- ♦ Try hard.
- ♦ Control their actions and emotions while working.
- ♦ Persevere in the face of challenges.
- ♦ Keep track of their performance until the goal is achieved.
- ♦ Believe the work has some degree of personal usefulness and relevance.
- ♦ Believe they can complete the work successfully through effort.

Even minor choices, such as choosing when to begin working and which homework assignment to do first are likely to increase your child's sense of self-determination and motivation.

Encouraging Self-Determination as a Motivator

Self-determination is the control a child feels and is able to exert over choices. It involves allowing your child to make choices when engaging in activities, to the extent that he or she is willing and capable. It is an important quality to develop in your child to build personal responsibility—a vital life skill. You can build your child's sense of self-determination and personal responsibility in many ways:

- ♦ Tuning in to your child's needs and interests
- ♦ Listening to help your child identify and name these needs and interests as well as the outcomes the child desires
- ♦ Resisting the urge to impose your own agenda, interests, and goals
- ♦ Helping your child design, select, and try strategies to achieve the goals
- ♦ Supplying the resources needed to try the strategies the child selected

In contrast, it is possible to harm your child's sense of self-determination by:

- ♦ Insisting on your own agenda, interests, and goals—for example, making your child work on a topic you think is interesting

- ♦ Supplying your child with ready solutions or answers
- ♦ Minimizing your child's choices by making "ought," "should," and "must" statements when discussing a school activity
- ♦ Telling your child what the standard of success must be

If you engage in these behaviors, your child is less likely to see the task as valuable or important and, as a result, is less likely to be motivated to do it.

Basic Homework Plan–Building Tips

- ♦ Give your child as much responsibility as possible in developing the plan.
- ♦ Build on this plan, acting as a consultant, not a director. For example, ask your child to propose a reasonable timetable within which to complete the work and a way you will know it is being done.
- ♦ If the proposed plan seems unreasonable, try to negotiate a more reasonable plan. Propose alternatives and make compromises so your child continues to feel some sense of choice and control over the outcome.

Parent Homework

For discussion during the next session, please make a note of times when you allowed some choice regarding how your child did homework. Pay special attention to whether you took over at these times or allowed your child some degree of control.