

Introduction

Academically unmotivated children and teenagers have little interest in learning. They fail to see a meaningful reason to try, and lack curiosity when in learning situations. In addition, they frequently need external pressure to do their schoolwork, and once they begin, they give minimal effort. Parents can influence their children's academic motivation in a positive way. When parents demonstrate an active interest in their children's academic achievement, their children are more likely to:

- ♦ Display interest in learning
- ♦ Expend effort
- ♦ Have confidence that they can successfully achieve academic goals
- ♦ Concentrate
- ♦ Consider education important and valuable
- ♦ Feel more secure, knowing that what they do at school matters to their parents

Parents can demonstrate a desire to be involved in their children's academic achievement in many ways, among them the following:

- ♦ Displaying a high level of interest in their children's school day and schoolwork
- ♦ Conveying values that emphasize the importance of education
- ♦ Monitoring their children's academic progress and level of compliance with school expectations
- ♦ Communicating with school personnel
- ♦ Participating in school-related activities
- ♦ Encouraging autonomous, self-regulated learning

The degree of parent involvement needed to facilitate motivation varies based on a child's age and particular strengths and weaknesses.

In general, parents need to be highly involved with younger students who have many learning weaknesses and do not need to be as involved with older children and teens who have many learning strengths.

Numerous research studies have examined the association between level of parent involvement and level of academic motivation. Generally, a consistent, positive association exists between relatively high levels of parent involvement and high levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, engagement when at school, and perceived confidence and ability to self-regulate when performing academic tasks (Gonzales-DeHass, Williams, & Holbein, 2005).

Based on an extensive review of the literature on parents and academic motivation, the sessions in this book provide school staff, as well as mental health practitioners working with children and adolescents, with a structured psychoeducational program. The goals of this program are to increase parents' understanding of ways they can provide emotional and instrumental support to increase their children's willingness to learn and level of effort. Parents frequently request guidance from educators and mental health professionals to help their children to the fullest extent they can. These sessions will provide the tools parents need to be as effective as possible.

The program is flexible: Use each session either as a discrete, stand-alone learning experience that might be of specific interest to specific groups of parents or use all the sessions as a complete, integrated workshop series. The latter may be especially desirable for parents of chronically unmotivated students, who often need a great deal of ongoing support and advice (Cotton, 2000). Clinicians working with children and adolescents with AD/HD and other learning difficulties will find the session information—especially the reproducible hand-outs for parents—especially valuable.

GOALS OF THE INTERVENTION

The sessions have a number of specific goals for parents. During the course of the sessions, parents will:

- ♦ Increase their belief that they can be effective influence agents
- ♦ Become more aware of their children's need for emotional support and ways that they can effectively convey positive expectations, warmth, and caring
- ♦ Increase their understanding of the types of information they need to be well-informed about their youngsters' school progress and ways to accurately interpret the information they acquire

- ♦ Heighten their appreciation of the importance of self-determination and learn how best to facilitate it
- ♦ Learn to be effective collaborators in establishing good study skills and effective homework partners
- ♦ Acquire the skills to provide feedback, rewards, and negative consequences in ways that are likely to enhance motivation
- ♦ Increase their ability to recognize when emotional distress may be interfering with academic motivation

PLANNING THE SESSIONS

To maximize the number of participants and limit attrition, planners need to assess the individuals who will constitute the intended audience of the sessions. Are they likely to have sufficient time and interest to attend the entire series? Or instead, would they prefer to attend only a limited number of sessions of special interest to them? A planner may distribute a letter to potential participants, listing the titles and objectives of each session. The letter should request that parents indicate their interest in attending particular sessions or the whole series. (See Appendix A for a sample letter.) Parents who choose to attend only one or two sessions often subsequently elect to attend an entire series.

It is also a good idea to consider whether participants are likely to need more than one meeting to cover the material in certain sessions. Some groups of parents may need more than one meeting to cover a session's material.

SESSION COMPONENTS

Each session has six components:

1. Objectives state the specific purposes of the session.
2. A knowledge base for leaders provides background information to help put the session content in context. (A handout of the knowledge base, written with parents in mind, is included for each session.)
3. A materials list notes the specific forms and materials that will be needed during the session.
4. A detailed session plan provides a sequence and structure for presenting the materials and information.
5. Homework assignment suggestions allow parents opportunities to apply what they have learned to real-life situations and, based on these experiences, receive corrective feedback.

6. A leader review checklist helps leaders track both the elements of the session adequately presented and those needing additional discussion.

The session plans suggest ways to present the material that are generally effective. However, leaders need to be flexible, matching the materials and discussion to the particular characteristics and needs of session participants. Therefore, before leading each session, the leader needs to review the session objectives, knowledge base, and session plans, considering whether the current situation requires any modifications.

THE JOB OF A SESSION LEADER

The sessions are interactive and learner-centered. Thus during the sessions, a leader should expect and allow participants to be the primary speakers. The job of the session leader is to facilitate and stimulate the participants' engagement, using the materials provided so they may articulate their concerns, questions, and opinions as well as express any confusion they may be having about the discussion. The leader should not act as an instructor who lectures and provides answers. Instead, he or she leads in the following ways:

- ♦ Proposes points of view suggested by empirical studies
- ♦ Encourages reactions to these points of view as well as alternative points of view
- ♦ Clarifies ideas, highlighting especially important ideas helpful to focus on and remember
- ♦ Gives and invites constructive feedback

KEY METHODS USED

The main instructional methods the sessions use include reminiscing, role-playing, storytelling, checklists and quizzes, and homework assignments.

- ♦ Reminiscing encourages participants to think back to their own childhoods and relive how they felt when their parents may have tried to influence their motivation levels. It is also an excellent tool to encourage parents to compare their own behavior to the model their parents provided, and their feelings when they were children to their perception of how their children now feel.
- ♦ Role-playing allows participants to practice a skill, become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in applying the skill,

learn from the modeling of others, and receive corrective feedback to increase their competence.

- ♦ Storytelling through vignettes facilitates involvement and structure by providing participants with sets of parent-and-child characters whose attitudes and actions they can visualize. By visualizing how these characters seem to be feeling and reacting, parents can better clarify their own thoughts and feelings, gaining a broader perspective on the way their children may be feeling.
- ♦ Checklists and quizzes give information about what participants now know and should do and stimulates discussion, allowing participants to compare their knowledge with the knowledge of others. When a leader readministers these measures, participants get valuable feedback on any changes in their knowledge and parenting.
- ♦ Homework assignments increase participants' awareness of the real-life experiences with their child that pertain to discussion of the session material, provide opportunities for corrective feedback by trying out and discussing suggested strategies, and increase the likelihood that participants will retain previously discussed material.

Knowledge base handouts for parents provide a record of the most important information in each session that parents can keep and refer to in the future.

EVALUATING SESSION EFFECTIVENESS

For an informal, rough approximation of the effectiveness of the intervention, a leader may compare each of two tools offered in the first and final sessions: the Gauging My Child's Academic Motivation Scale (Appendix B) and the Parent Involvement with Academic Achievement Scale (Appendix C). These comparisons provide information about how changes in each parent's involvement with his or her child's school experience affects academic motivation. For a more scientific evaluation, a researcher may give a matching group of parents who have not received the intervention (e.g., those on a waiting list) these scales concurrently. By comparing the results from the intervention group with the results from the control group, a researcher may, with more certainty, attribute any relative gains made by the intervention group to participation in the sessions.