

# Motivating The Unmotivated Student

TOPICS: Resources For Parents Resources For Teachers



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Kevin sits at his desk doodling while the other students are eagerly writing their biographical essays. Time has almost run out and it is clear he will have nothing to hand in. You want to light a fire under him and get him motivated, but how?

There is a natural tendency for teachers or parents to react to disengaged, lackluster behavior with pressures and pushes. After all, such behavior is frustrating and pulls for this. However, research has shown that more pressure in the form of rewards or punishments, directing, yelling, or threatening, actually **undermines children's own motivation to act**. It is possible to get some very short-term compliance but in the long-term this behavior is likely to continue and possibly worsen.

So is there another approach to motivating the unmotivated? First, it is important to think about what motivating someone means. Motivating is not the same as influencing. Influence may involve getting someone to do something through whatever means possible – for example using rewards or taking away consequences. However, motivating someone means tapping into their own goals or purposes – helping them to

be more purposeful and intentional about what they are doing. It is a much more challenging task!

A motivational approach involves considering why the student is not motivated. From a **Self-Determination Theory** perspective, people are less motivated when one (or more) of three needs is not being met.

**Autonomy** – People need to feel choiceful or behind their own actions. Is the student feeling pressured or pushed?

**Competence** – People need to feel capable and effective at a task. Does the student feel incapable of completing the task?

**Relatedness** – People need to feel they are valued members of a group. Is the student feeling disconnected from others?

### **Approaching the situation**

- Try to find out what is preventing the student from engaging in the material. Is he feeling like he has to do something he doesn't want to do? Does he feel it is too hard?
- Try some strategies that address the unmet need:

#### **Autonomy –**

- Give the student some choices about how to do the assignment.
- Provide some information about how the assignment might help the student to reach his own goals (e.g., share some of his strengths with other students).

#### **Competence –**

- Consider breaking down the task into more manageable units (e.g., just work on the first 2 lines and don't worry about the rest for now).
- Provide a start that the student can build on.

#### **Relatedness –**

- Ask another student to brainstorm with the student about what each wants to write about.
- Chat with the student for a minute about what he likes and dislikes for a start.

### **Do Some Students Need Pressure and Control?**

But one might ask – don't some children need pressure and control to be successful? The answer is no. Studies show that unmotivated students are even more negatively affected by pressure than more motivated ones. Less motivated students may need

more assistance in the form of guidelines and clear expectations but pushing and pressuring do not help in the long run.

Taking a motivational approach can be difficult, especially in a busy classroom. But, when possible, considering how to help students satisfy their needs may help to develop more motivated learners and improve relationships in the classroom and home.