

Fostering Children's Motivation to Learn

by

Lisa White-McNulty, University of St. Francis; Evanthia N. Patrikakou, DePaul University; and Roger P. Weissberg, University of Illinois at Chicago

Educators and parents share a common goal: helping children and youth become successful in school and life. In order to realize this goal, students need to acquire a solid base of academic, social, and emotional skills. The ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively are key to school and life success.

Evidence from the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) suggests that children learn best in challenging, meaningful contexts supported by caring relationships (see www.CASEL.org for more information about SEL research and practice). The basic principles of social and emotional learning also serve as the underlying principles of motivation. A deeper understanding of these principles enables committed adults to create an environment that fosters children's motivation to learn.

Motivation is what stimulates and focuses our actions. It is an internal state that can be thought of as our "reasons for doing." Needs, thoughts, and emotions each contribute to our motivation. Since the mid-1900s, researchers and educators have developed a broad base of evidence linking individuals' motivation to learn with a number of positive outcomes, including persistence in completing tasks, increased academic performance, creativity, and emotional well-being.

Research has shown that motivated students display a commitment to learning that is crucial for academic, social, and emotional development, and that leads to school and life success. Students who are motivated find schoolwork interesting and important, become absorbed in their studies, and put forth the effort necessary to achieve their goals. Motivated students also seek out challenges and find ways to keep going in the face of difficulty. They have a positive attitude toward learning and school, and they develop healthy problem-solving skills.

By working together, parents and teachers can reinforce messages about the value of education and the importance of doing one's best. Such efforts serve our ultimate goal of helping children become knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and healthy citizens. The three sections that follow offer specific strategies for fostering motivation in the classroom by focusing on the **3 Cs**: helping students feel *Capable*, *Connected*, and in *Control*.

Helping Students Feel Capable

Evidence shows a positive relationship between students' confidence in their abilities and their subsequent performance and success. When children and youth have that "I think I can" attitude,

they are more likely to try hard, and they will persist even if they find the work difficult. Teachers can draw on a number of strategies to help students at all levels of ability feel capable.

- *Have High Expectations.* Effective teachers believe that all children can learn. It's important to check your assumptions about children's potential based on gender, cultural/ethnic background, economic status, and learning or other disabilities. Communicating your own positive beliefs and expectations, through words and actions, helps students to believe in themselves.
- *Provide Appropriate Supports.* High expectations carry with them the responsibility for making sure that students have the supports they need to be successful in challenging work. While the type of support may vary, all students benefit from clear directions, explicit instruction, frequent opportunities to check for understanding, and encouragement to seek out help when it is needed.
- *Provide Task-Specific Feedback.* Like the best athletic coaches, effective teachers give their students detailed information on their performance, along with frequent opportunities to practice and demonstrate mastery. Prompt and specific feedback helps students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Equally important is to help children set realistic, achievable goals for improvement. This lets them know that learning is an ongoing process.
- *Focus on Progress.* Use your school's education standards to help children set goals for their learning and have them chart—and celebrate—their progress. Again, make sure they know that you expect all your students to meet the goals, but perhaps not all at the same rate. When the going gets tough, reminding students how much progress they have made can alleviate frustration.

Helping Students Feel Connected

The desire to be safe, accepted, and connected with others is part of the basic human need to belong. Research suggests that positive, caring relationships with peers and adults enable students to meet their potential. It takes time to cultivate a classroom community in which all members trust, support, and care for each other, but the rewards are worth it. In a caring classroom, the positive values of hard work, achievement, and good citizenship can be a powerful antidote to the view that “It's not cool to like school,” particularly as students reach adolescence. The following strategies can help teachers make their classroom a welcoming place for all children.

- *Establish Classroom Meetings.* Classroom meetings provide a time for students and teachers to get to know each other, share opinions and feelings, discuss classroom problems, and make group decisions. Within the structure of a meeting, children also have the opportunity to practice important social and emotional competencies such as active listening, problem solving, and expressing appreciation. Meetings are often incorporated into the daily morning routine of an elementary classroom, or as part of a weekly schedule in middle and high school.
- *Assign Classroom Responsibilities.* In addition to helping students feel capable, giving them responsibilities in the classroom lets them feel needed, promoting a caring climate in which all members of the group feel valued for their contributions. Appropriate tasks could range from taking attendance, to serving as a peer mediator, to editing each other's writing.

- *Make Use of Cooperative Learning.* Having students work in pairs and small groups allows them to interact in positive, structured, supervised ways that promote learning. Such practices stimulate intellectual development by requiring students to reconcile others' ideas and opinions with their own. Cooperative learning also provides opportunities for students to develop social and emotional skills such as perspective taking, communication, and negotiation.
- *Partner With Families.* Establishing regular communication with parents and caregivers gives teachers the critical information necessary to meet the needs of their students. When children know that the adults in their lives are working together for them, they understand that school is a priority. Weekly newsletters, positive notes sent home, and invitations to families to become part of the classroom are a few ways to make those essential connections.

Helping Students Feel in Control

All children need to feel a sense of autonomy—that they have some control over what they do. This need becomes even more important when students enter adolescence. Research has shown positive links between individuals' feelings of autonomy and their effort and persistence on tasks, as well as their creativity, progress, and achievement. Although much of what students do in schools is required of them, teachers can help students feel in control of their learning through the following strategies:

- *Offer Choices.* Offering students options whenever possible helps them feel a sense of control even in a structured environment like school. Think through possible options, setting limits if necessary in order to ensure that all potential choices are reasonable, acceptable, and developmentally appropriate. Younger students can handle decisions between two or three options without being overwhelmed, for example, while adolescents may appreciate more freedom.
- *Teach Decision-Making Skills.* If students' selections are to provide them with good chances of being successful, students need to learn to make good decisions. Practice problem solving and decision making in sizeable groups, while modeling such skills as brainstorming alternatives, thinking through consequences, and reflecting on the outcomes of decisions. Providing opportunities to practice responsible decision making in the classroom also strengthens children's ability to make good choices in situations outside of school, which is an essential skill for life success.
- *Make It Interesting.* Wherever possible, connect the material with students' lives. Allow those connections to surface by finding out what they already know about the subject and what they might be interested in knowing. Then use students' background knowledge to extend their learning. Having students research their own family tree, for example, is a good way to introduce historical research skills.
- *Help Students Value Learning.* As hard as we try to make learning interesting, some activities can be tedious and dull. Students will more freely engage in a lesson, however, if they understand why it teaches an important skill or piece of knowledge. Find opportunities to point out how students can use what they learn every day: math to make change at the store, vocabulary to write songs, science for predicting the weather. Help adolescents see the relevance of what they are learning to their career goals.

All human beings need to feel capable, connected, and in control. These important elements foster student motivation and encourage learning for life. Families, schools, and communities can work together to provide the conditions that support children and youth and allow them to flourish. In this way, parents and teachers can positively contribute to children's quest to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and healthy citizens.

The 3 Cs: Strategies at a Glance

Help Students Feel Capable

High expectations
Appropriate support
Task-specific feedback
Focus on progress

Help Students Feel Connected

Classroom meetings
Classroom responsibilities
Cooperative learning
Partner with families

Help Students Feel In Control

Offer choices
Teach decision making
Make it interesting
Show value of learning

Resources

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