

Motivation, Learning and Achievement

In the last couple of newsletters we have looked at attention and concentration. I would like to spend some time here looking at another important factor related to school success, namely motivation. For educators, motivation is arguably the most important key to engaging students and enhancing learning and teaching. For parents, finding that seemingly magical key for unlocking a child's motivational core can be an arduous task at times, especially during adolescence. Understanding motivation is not a simple task and it is often taken-for-granted as something easily enhanced via rewards and/or punishment. Unfortunately a narrow view of motivation can undermine school endeavour, social behaviour, achievement and any measure of 'deep' and meaningful learning. Without motivation, a person may never achieve anything tangible or significant. So what is it, how does it work and what can we do to motivate the children around us?

Broadly defined, motivation is a person's internal instigation and direction that influences their behaviour. In its simplest sense, motivation is something that urges someone to do something or achieve something. The word itself comes from the Latin root, *movere*, meaning to set in motion. Motivation is influenced by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, family, culture, health, and prior physical, social, emotional and environmental learning experiences. Motivation is also subject to influence from peers, teachers, parents, subjects and schools and is informed by ethnic and cultural backgrounds. From a neurological perspective, motivation is intimately linked with the brain's limbic system where emotions and memories are housed and processed. That being said, you don't need to be a neuroscientist to know that emotion and motivation are linked but you do need to know that motivation is not an emotion per se but rather it is a process that links emotion to action. That process in itself can be driven by intrinsic or extrinsic factors.

Extrinsic motivation is derived from external incentives in the form of rewards or the avoidance of punishment. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is derived from an innate desire to achieve a particular task or engagement in some form of personally meaningful activity. Importantly, while the former may be easily administered to, the latter is more desirable and what would you say if I told you that rewards and punishments were one in the same thing?

Rewards and punishment operate on the same principle – do this and you get that. Importantly, the most significant problem with using rewards and punishment as motivational tools is that they rely on the decision of others. Conversely, intrinsic motivation is derived from within and as such each individual has greater control and autonomy over their actions and approaches to learning and engagement with activities in a meaningful way; they do things for the joy of doing it or because they want to discover something, answer a question or experience a feeling of accomplishment. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that in terms of raising and educating children intrinsic motivation is the best type of motivation because it comes from your children's mind. Experts in the fields of psychology, child development and neuroscience believe and agree that intrinsic motivation can provide better results in many facets of life because children do something on their own without interference from others. Intrinsic motivation can provide a range of benefits to your children and next month I will discuss this along with practical methods for engaging in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. I hope the information provided thus far will motivate you to read further next month.

Michael C Nagel (PhD)
Associate Professor
Head of Education Programs
University of the Sunshine Coast
mnagel@usc.edu.au