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Motivating Learning in Young Children

Young children learn from everything they do. They are naturally curious; they want to explore and discover. If their explorations bring pleasure or success, they will want to learn more. During these early years, children form attitudes about learning that will last a lifetime. Children who receive the right sort of support and encouragement during these years will be creative, adventurous learners throughout their lives. Children who do not receive this sort of support and interaction are likely to have a much different attitude about learning later in life.

Characteristics of Motivation in Young Children

Children do many things simply because they want to do them. Selecting a toy or a shirt to wear is the result of "intrinsic motivation." The child makes her *own* choice and achieves satisfaction from both the act of choosing and from the opportunity to play with the toy or wear the shirt. Since the activity is generating the motivation, it is mostly self-sustaining for as long as the child wants to continue the activity.

Children also engage in some activities because adults tell them to, or in an effort to please another party. These activities are "extrinsically motivated." When a child is extrinsically motivated, the reward comes from outside the child-it has to be provided by someone else, and has to be continually given for the child to remain motivated enough to continue the activity. It is more difficult for a child to sustain extrinsically motivated activity because of this reliance upon some outside force.

Since intrinsically motivated activity is more rewarding in and of itself, children learn more from this sort of activity, and they retain that learning better. Intrinsically motivated children are more involved in their own learning and development. In other words, a child is more likely to learn and retain information when he is intrinsically motivated - when he believes he is pleasing himself. Parents can build on this sense of confidence by guiding their child's play and activities while still giving the child a range of options. This unstructured play is an essential element of the child's motivation, learning, and development.

A number of behavioral characteristics are indicators of high motivation. Here are some of the important factors and some ways to help your child develop these characteristics.

Persistence is the ability to stay with a task for a reasonably long period of time. While very young children cannot concentrate on one activity for an hour, there are still measurable differences in the length of time that young children will engage in an activity. A highly motivated child will stay involved for a long period of time, whereas an unmotivated child will give up very easily when not instantly successful. Children learn persistence when they are successful at a challenging task. The art in building persistence is in offering a task that is just challenging enough, but not overwhelming.

Choice of challenge is another characteristic of motivation. Children who experience success in meeting one challenge will become motivated, welcoming another. These motivated learners will choose an activity that is slightly difficult for them, but provides an appropriate challenge. When they successfully complete such a task, children gain a high level of satisfaction. Unmotivated children (those who have not experienced early success) will pick something that is very easy and ensures an instant success. With such easy success, children feel only a very low level of satisfaction, because they know that the task offered little challenge. The challenge for parents is helping their child find an appropriate challenge while still allowing the choice to be the child's.

The amount of **dependency on adults** is another indicator of motivation. Children with strong intrinsic motivation do not need an adult constantly watching and helping with activities. Children who have a lower level of motivation or are extrinsically motivated need constant attention from adults and cannot function independently. Since independence is an important aspect of quality learning, this dependence on adults will greatly limit children's ability to succeed in school. Parents can increase the likelihood of their child's building independent motivation by providing toys and activities that play to the child's natural creativity and curiosity. Often, these are the simplest, most basic playthings: blocks, little plastic "people," a toy car or two, and crayons and paper. These things encourage children to invent their own worlds rather than depending on an adult to entertain them.

The last indicator of motivational level is **emotion**. Children who are clearly motivated will have a positive display of emotion. They are satisfied with their work and show more enjoyment in the activity. Children without appropriate motivation will appear quiet, sullen and bored. They will not take any apparent pleasure in their activity and will often complain. As a parent, you are probably the best judge of your child's moods. That cranky, whiny voice is usually a good indicator that a child doesn't feel very good about herself and needs a new adventure of some sort.

Developing Motivation

Newborn infants are born with a tremendous amount of intrinsic motivation. This motivation is aimed toward having some visible effect on the environment. When infants can actually see the results of their actions as a reward, they are motivated to continue those actions. These attempts toward control are limited within the young child, and include crying, vocalizations, facial expressions and small body movements. Toys that change or make sound as the child moves them are therefore strong motivators.

As infants grow and continue to mature (9-24 months), more voluntary, purposeful movements are possible. This gives them more control of their environment. This wider range of control allows children to feel that they are successful. Success leads to higher self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, which leads to strengthened motivation. As children continue to develop during this time period, they are better able to make decisions and plan what to do to gain control of things around them. They are beginning to set their own goals for activities. This success is not based upon adult standards, but totally upon the child's ability to accomplish the goals that he has set out for himself.

By two years of age, children are developing the ability to execute a sequence of events in order to achieve a goal. They also have an appreciation for standards and begin to evaluate their efforts. By three years of age, children become interested in doing things well, as opposed to just doing them. They have an idea of various levels of competency in performance and judge their success by their own internal standards. Therefore they have much less need for adult feedback about the quality of their efforts.

Preschoolers (age 3-5 years) are beginning to be more involved with verbal problem solving skills. They direct their own learning through speech and use vocal communication to direct their own behavior to solve problems. Young children are often heard talking themselves through a series of actions that lead to the solution of a problem. As children get older, this "talking out loud" will become an internal monologue. This newly developing ability to problem solve is the basis for motivation at this stage. Having the self confidence to know that one can solve a problem motivates the learner to accept other new and challenging situations, which in turn lead to greater learning.

Enhancing Motivation

For parents of young children, the goal should be to appropriately support the development of motivation so that there is a proper foundation for optimal educational growth. Parents should be very cautious about the use of many extrinsic rewards, as this can severely interfere with the child's motivational development. Praise for an accomplishment is appropriate, but be sure that your child is doing a task because she is interested, not because she thinks it will bring praise from you.

Difficulties arise when adults or others within the child's environment enforce external standards and replace the internal reward system with one that depends upon outside forces to supply all of the rewards (candy, money, excessive praise). Children then begin to feel successful only if *someone else* rewards them for accomplishments. They lose their intrinsic motivation and may only feel success when someone else judges them as successful. In such situations, children may not develop feelings of self-worth, and will judge their own value by someone else's standards. Your child should never need to ask, "Did I do well?" She should know and be confident in her own successes.

There are several strategies parents can use to help children remain more fully intrinsically motivated.

- Provide an environment (through age appropriate toys, activities, etc.) that allows children to freely explore and to see the effect of their actions (i.e., toys that have visible or tangible changes when moved).
- Allow children ample time when working to allow for persistence. When children are deeply involved with an activity, make sure that they can finish without interruption. Resist the natural urge to "help," and let the child know if, for example, we have to go to the grocery store in a few minutes.
- Respond to children's needs in a consistent, predictable manner, but allow them to be as independent as possible. This does NOT mean ceding all control to your child. All

children need clearly defined limits. Playtime, however, need not be structured and organized. Let your kid be a kid!

- Provide many opportunities for children and adults to explore together and interact directly. It is important for both children and adults to be working together on an activity. This lets you observe, model, and encourage your child.
- Provide situations that give children an acceptable challenge. Activities that are slightly difficult for the child will be more motivating and provide for stronger feelings of success when accomplished. This may take some trial and error at first.
- Give children opportunities to evaluate their own accomplishments. Rather than stating that you think they have done a good job, ask them what they think of their work. You'll never go wrong by asking the question, "What do YOU think?"
- Do not use excessive rewards. They tend to undermine children's ability to value themselves. Praise and rewards should be based upon children's effort and persistence, rather than on the actual accomplishment.

The world through a child's eyes is an awesome place. Allow children to explore and discover their world. Around every corner is an experience just waiting to surprise and excite young growing minds; all they need is a small amount of direction and a large amount of freedom. It is not necessary to praise and reward children for their own actions as they attempt to control their environment. The feelings of accomplishment they gain from results of those actions will be reward enough. Providing excessive praise and rewards is unnecessary and can actually be harmful to children's motivation and desire to learn. Remember, the habits and attitudes toward learning that are formed in these early years set the mood for all future learning.

Resources

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