

MOTIVATING TEENAGERS AND CHILDREN

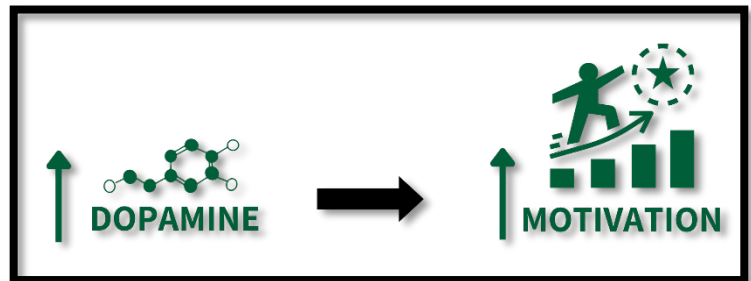
Motivation is complicated.

Typical strategies such as positive reinforcement and punishment work temporarily, but rarely last. In fact, these methods often backfire and demotivate teenagers.

Understanding how to motivate a teenager in the right way (and for the right reasons) is essential to their long-term success.

Motivation & The Brain

Motivation involves various systems in the brain, but the predominant system for motivation is the dopamine system.



Dopamine levels are boosted when we encounter rewarding experiences, such as winning a game or being praised. In contrast, low levels of dopamine are associated with a lack of motivation, boredom, and depression. An optimal dopamine level is important in achieving goals—it feels good when we accomplish goals and tasks.

When dopamine is low, we are more likely to seek immediate gratification through drugs, gambling, video games, watching TV, speeding, overspending, and engaging in risky behaviors (doing “mischievous” things can be exciting and interesting).

Dopamine is the key to all of this—especially a teenager’s motivation.

Teenage years present many challenges. Teenage brains are growing and developing rapidly. Some neurons are beginning to strengthen connections while others are weakening their connections—we call this neuroplasticity. A teenager’s experiences during this period of development are crucial for the process of neuroplasticity to occur appropriately.

Unfortunately, teenagers have a lot to deal with. Hormones are raging, bodies are changing, and their emotional brain (e.g., amygdala) and reasoning brain (e.g., frontal lobe) are constantly fighting each other. It doesn’t help that the teenage frontal lobe develops more

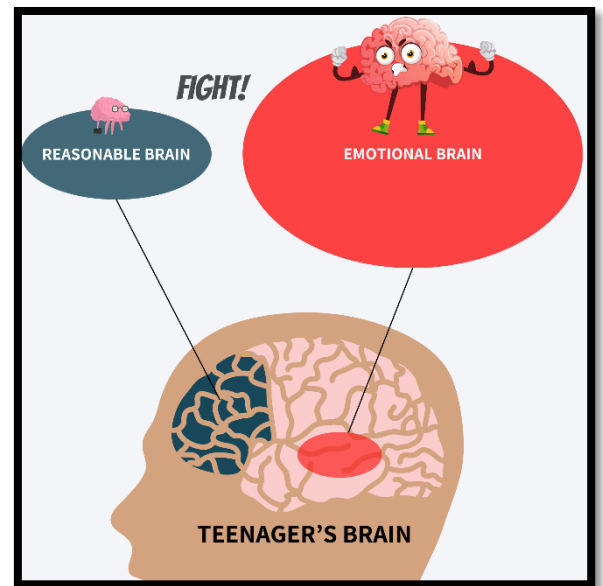
slowly, which means they are prone to impulsive behaviors and emotional instability/lability (i.e., they have trouble self-regulating and thinking before acting).

Back to dopamine.

Stress is the enemy of dopamine.

A teen's brain is much more sensitive to stress. This means dopamine levels are also very sensitive to stress (i.e., it's very easy for a teenager's levels of dopamine to fall).

So, before raising dopamine levels, we need to prevent them from dropping.



Even mild chronic stress can cause a teenager's dopamine levels to plummet so that they don't want to do anything.

Chronic stress, also called toxic stress, is not good for anyone at any age, but it is particularly harmful for adolescent brains because it may lead to permanent changes in brain development and cause problems in the areas of the brain associated with learning, memory, and attention. Toxic stress during teenage years contributes significantly to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, and drug abuse.

It's the perfect storm--not only are teenagers more susceptible to stress, but they are also more reactive and emotional, which means they can lose motivation to study easily and act very irrationally (i.e., emotionally) over small requests to do schoolwork, chores, etc.

Quite frankly, they can't help it.

Their emotional regulation and motivational systems are very fragile. This doesn't mean parents should just do whatever their kids say or give them whatever they want.

So, what can parents do to motivate their teenager?

1. Reduce Excessive Stress

Some stress is healthy, but too much stress is toxic. One of the best things parents can do to motivate their teenagers to study is to remove excessive stress from their lives.

Sadly, parents are one of the most common sources of chronic stress for teenagers. Parents are constantly reminding their children about what they should do. More reminders create unnecessary stress. Below are the chronic stressors to eliminate.

Chronic stressors to eliminate
Stop nagging constantly about schoolwork. Don't keep reminding them about college. Don't punish them for poor grades or missing homework. No more staying on their cases all the time.

2. Rebuilding the Relationship

This is by far the most important. Relatedness is one of the most powerful motivators. It's the feeling of belonging and connecting with someone who cares. Unmotivated teenagers often have strained relationships with their parents.

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Motivate them by mending the relationship and becoming a source of strength in their life instead of a source of stress.

Building a strong parent-child relationship is essential. Imagine being in a relationship where you're constantly being ordered around and disrespected, and always feeling on the "wrong side" of things. Would you want to be in a relationship like that?

A strong, positive relationship is built on trust and respect. Remember, we're raising children to become adults. It's striking how talking to teenagers as if they are adults can change their response. Having a close, warm, and accepting relationship with parents is the strongest predictor of future success.

Teenagers internalize the values of those they feel connected to.

Consider the two reasons for studying below. Which one is more compelling?

- A. *"I need to study because otherwise I would be punished."*
- B. *"I need to study because learning is important to my parents and therefore, it's important to me too".*

Clearly, reason B is more compelling. But, for this to work, a strong relationship is essential.

Below are some things to consider in rebuilding the relationship.

Rebuilding the Relationship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise effort, not outcome. • Show interest in your teenagers' interests, even if you aren't interested at all. • Actively Listening and show empathy for their situation even if you don't believe it is justified. This means discussing things with your teenager when you don't agree. • Work together to set realistic, achievable, and clear academic and emotional goals. • Give autonomous support and help them internalize the value of learning. • Keep an open, nonjudgmental line of communication. • Avoid family triangulation (i.e., COPARENTING IS KEY). • If you need to punish (i.e., taking away phone, computer, etc.), it is important to be clear about why the punishment is necessary for the teenager's personal growth, what the teenager can do differently next time to avoid such punishment, and what, specifically, the teenager must do to be off "probation."

3. Autonomy and Control

Autonomy is the most important motivator.

Teenagers who think they have control over their activities are more motivated. Teenagers are not motivated when they feel controlled or pressured to study or do things they don't want to do.

However, teenagers must first want to study willingly to have the motivation to do it. When teenagers are allowed the autonomy to decide what activities to engage in, they will be self-driven to do things they deem valuable.

Granting a healthy sense of control also means that your teenager will become responsible for things that they should be responsible for.

School work must be your teen's responsibility, not yours. So, make them the captain of that ship.

Without a sense of control, teenagers will not be intrinsically motivated to do things.

Granting autonomy is scary for parents. This is understandable.

When an “oppressed” teen is suddenly given freedom, many of them will take advantage of it and stop doing everything.

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When this happens, the parent-child bond is strained even more if the parents immediately declare, “It doesn’t work,” and jump back into the driver’s seat and remove the teenager’s autonomy.

If this happens, prioritize spending more time connecting and strengthening your relationship rather than nagging about homework.

Remember, true autonomy is given when the child gets to experience the natural consequences of their actions (or the lack of actions).

4. Encourage and Support Self-Mastery

The Self-Determination Theory suggests that a sense of competence can improve one’s motivation. A sense of mastery can develop when your child tackles a task easy enough to complete, but difficult enough for them to feel challenged.

Helping teenagers master schoolwork can help bolster their self-esteem in addition to competence. If a subject is too hard, it will be hard to feel motivated to do something you’re not good at.

If your teenager is struggling with schoolwork because they are not doing well, consider hiring a tutor to help or seeking a therapist for your teenager. Find a tutor or therapist your child can relate to, because they can then also motivate your teenager through relatedness.

Regardless, be sure to involve them in this decision so they can feel in control.

5. Praise effort over outcome

Teenagers (and adults) are much more motivated to continue pushing through a difficult time when they are praised for their efforts regardless of the outcome. Praise increases dopamine. How to praise a teenager is equally important. This concept is best illustrated by an interesting study on children and motivation:

Researchers separated children into two groups, Group A and Group B. Both groups were asked to complete a test. The children in Group A were praised for their performance on the test. “Good job! You are so smart! Look how well you did!” The children in Group B were not praised for their performance. In fact, their performance wasn’t even discussed. Instead, the children in Group B were praised for the effort they put into completing the test.

Then, the researchers administered another test to both groups. This test was a much more difficult test. What they discovered was very interesting...

The children in Group A did not perform as well on the test and gave up sooner compared to the children in Group B who performed better on the test and struggled with it for longer.

One of the unintended consequences of praising children for their achievements, is that they begin attaching their value and worth on their achievements. This adds additional pressure because if they have much more to lose if they don’t perform.

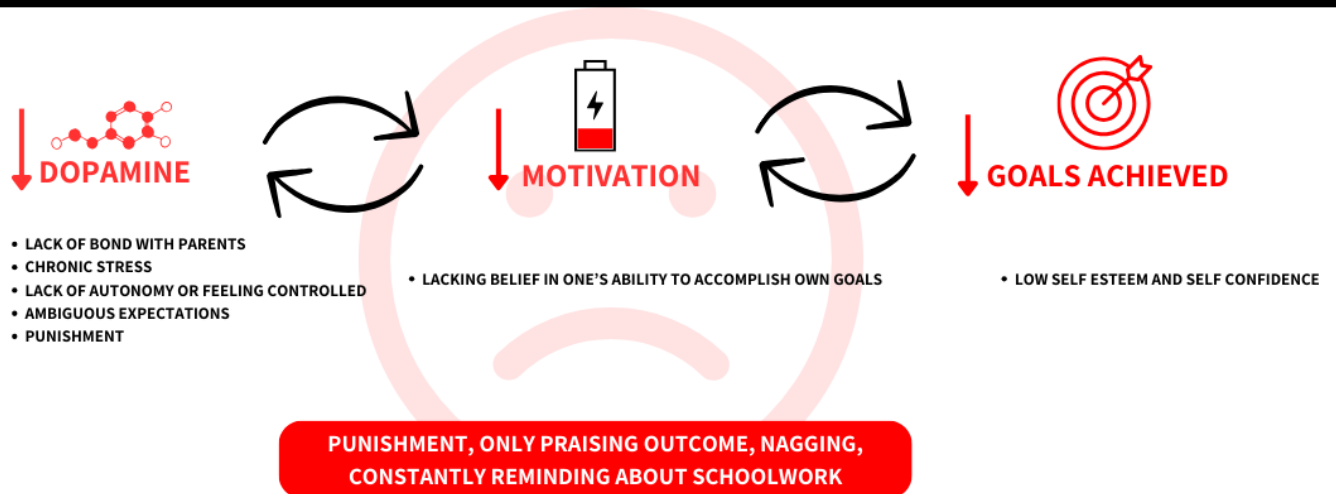
6. Encourage Dopamine Enhancing Activities

One way to help teens enhance their dopamine levels is exercising. Physical activities can help regulate dopamine release in the brain. In addition, exercise can improve teenagers’ mood and mental wellbeing. Exercise is also related to enhanced cognitive functioning and brain plasticity.

If these strategies don't help, consider having your teenager evaluated for depression, anxiety, or other health problems. This is where therapy, family therapy, and/or medication can be very useful.



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