



FAMILY *Matters*

How do I motivate my academically underachieving child?

Michael D. Zito, Ph.D.



This is a very common complaint I hear from parents about children of all ages as well as college students. Parents are often very frustrated because they have tried multiple methods that have been unsuccessful in motivating their child. Parental motivational techniques often include taking away meaningful possessions, showing their anger or displeasure often to no avail. Low motivation resulting in underachievement may be a result of other problems that need to be considered. Sometimes children have undiagnosed learning disabilities which can contribute to low academic motivation. An appropriate psycho-educational evaluation can rule this out. Barring a learning disability or significant weakness, underachievement often has to do with low perceived self-efficacy and ineffective task approach. Low perceived self-efficacy means that a child has a negative belief about their ability to be successful. Given the negative belief, they are reluctant to initiate academic tasks including the much dreaded homework. School is difficult enough for underachievers that homework becomes a painful reminder of their perceived inadequacies. The ineffective task approach occurs when children think of their academic task as monumental and insurmountable. This leads to procrastination (“I’ll do it later”) and avoidance. These children do not believe success is in their control so they avoid putting in the

effort. Consequently, they develop an external sense of control which leads them to experience “learned helplessness” (my effort doesn’t help).

There is often an unconscious self-protective dynamic that is commonly uncovered in therapy. To protect themselves from extreme disappointment, underachievers will often intentionally put in low effort and motivation. At first, this appears illogical to most parents. However, underachievers put in low effort because they believe that if they try their best and are unsuccessful then they risk becoming extremely disappointed in themselves and lose hope about having greater potential. The corollary is that if I don’t try and I am unsuccessful that means I still have hope for the potential to be successful. As confusing as it may seem to a parent, it explains an underachiever’s behavior quite well. In essence, for underachievers, this thinking becomes a way to protect themselves from disappointment and maintains a hope that they could do better if they really tried.

So what can a parent do?

- Promote feelings of success by breaking academic tasks into smaller manageable parts.
- Help the child see the connection between effort and outcome.

- Rule out learning disabilities or other weaknesses if suspected based teacher observations and on family history.
- Promote a “just try the first one” approach on homework which hopefully can show them that they can be successful despite their initial negative prediction by creating the thought “It is not as bad as I thought it would be.”
- Help them see avoidance is a choice (and a bad choice) they make not something that just happens to them.
- Provide objective positive feedback (i.e., test results) of their abilities to counteract their negative perceived abilities.
- Hold them accountable for their actions by connecting effortful academic behavior to earning their privileges (which is different from taking privileges away)
- Help your child set realistic short and long term goals that are monitored for completion.
- Understand that negative approaches such as yelling and punishing often lead to arguments that usually result in the child blaming the parents which takes the focus off academics.
- Assist your child in understanding how their negative predictions promote avoidance.

Michael D. Zito, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist with offices in Warren and Morristown. He practices clinical and sport psychology with children through adults and can be reached at MichaelZitoPhD@yahoo.com Dr. Zito welcomes your questions and ideas for future articles.