

## The Art and Science of Motivation

by Andrew Pudewa

I have studied the science and art of motivation for many years, first as a violin teacher, then as a writing teacher, and finally as a parent. Although I am far from perfect in my understanding and practice, I have found some basic principles which have helped me and many other parents understand their children better, empowering us to more effectively motivate our kids at times when resistance and unwillingness may seem overwhelming. Parents can easily think—and often say—that their child is “lazy.” I challenge that idea. A genuinely lazy child is a rare thing; children left on their own are tremendously industrious creatures. It might be possible to create a lazy child with years of continuous television and videogames, but in general, children are not lazy. In his excellent book, *The Myth of Laziness*, Dr. Mel Levine analyzes several cases of people considered lazy and explores the internal and external factors that directly affect productive output. It is a book that can benefit every teacher and parent. However, in our home education efforts, we often find times when our children do not want to do what we want them to do, and we misunderstand this as laziness. Specifically, in the context of education, we find that children often rebel against learning or practicing the things we want them to learn or practice. I believe that when a child says something like, “I hate . . .” or “I can’t . . .” or when they behave in such a way as to make it very hard to get them to do things, there are one or more underlying causes. If we can identify these causes, we can restructure our interactions and expectations in such a way that we gain their willingness and ultimately their enthusiasm—though it may take serious effort on our part.

One of the Seven Keys of Great Teaching as explained in Oliver Van DeMille’s book, *A Thomas Jefferson Education*, is: “Inspire, not Require.” DeMille also points out that doing this can be a tough job. To require performance (“Do this or suffer punishment of some sort”) is easy, but to inspire a student to want to work and learn necessitates much more effort on the part of the parent or teacher. However, DeMille also points out—quite accurately—that no real learning happens unless the learner chooses to learn. No one can make anyone else learn anything. Yes, maybe someone can threaten us into studying and retaining information long enough to pass a test of some sort, but there is no lasting effect. Any of us who slogged through a mindnumbingly boring high school biology class (and maybe even got an A!) but don’t know any biology today (and probably didn’t three months after the school year was over) can attest to the

fact that it is possible to pretend to learn and even get a passing grade while, in actuality, learning almost nothing in the process. Therefore, in my study of motivation, I have isolated a factor that most often determines when and whether real learning will occur, and I use the word *relevancy* to identify it. If something is relevant to you, if it is significant, meaningful, useful, interesting, helpful, then it is easy to study and learn. If something is not relevant to you, if it is not significant, not meaningful, not useful or interesting, then it is very hard to study and learn. I see this as being so true in my own life, and it is true for almost every child I have ever met. I have also discovered four basic kinds of relevancy, and because some are more powerful than others, a parent or teacher who understands them can utilize the information quite beneficially. The four forms of relevancy are intrinsic, inspired, contrived, and enforced; they are generally effective in that order.

Intrinsic relevancy is when something is interesting because it is. Intrinsic interests are likely formed by a combination of personality and environment, and we all have specific interests—some of which may have surfaced at a young age, most of which tend to become stronger as we grow into adulthood. Clearly, children have certain interests common to all and useful for survival. For example, almost all children are interested in knowing about animals that are dangerous or poisonous, and almost all boys have an interest in weaponry. Then, most children start to show more defined and specific interests as they move into the age of reason. Often their interests differ from ours, and we wonder where that fascination came from. However, as teachers and parents, we can and should capitalize on these intrinsic interests. As homeschoolers, we have a great deal of freedom in our choices of curriculum and content—much to the benefit of our children if we are willing to maximize in the curriculum things which are most relevant to them. The number of things we could learn is unlimited, and we will never learn everything about everything—we will never cover all the bases. No teacher in any school anywhere is “covering all the bases,” so don’t even try. That’s the bad news and the good news. Since the number of possible things to learn is unlimited, and we can’t do it all, we can make choices—and whenever possible, choose things that are naturally interesting to our children. They will be much more motivated and have much better retention, as can be seen by how most boys will learn about medieval weaponry far more easily than they will learn about edible plants of North America. If you have a choice, go for what has intrinsic relevancy, and more real learning will happen in the time available.

The second form of relevancy, inspired relevancy, can also be very effective. Although a child may not have a natural interest in something, he or she will easily become interested if someone they love or respect has a sincere enthusiasm about it. Excitement can be contagious. Most of us liked the subjects in school that were taught by the enthusiastic, knowledgeable, excited teachers, and we disliked the subjects taught by mechanical, dull, uninspired teachers. Children will often become interested because of peer associations, and very often children want to learn about the things their parents enjoy learning. To maximize inspired relevancy, we as parents and teachers want to provide opportunities for children to see others excited about what they're learning, to be joyful and enthusiastic in our teaching, and if we cannot, find other parents or teachers who are excited. Perhaps we can even set up a little class for our kids and some of their friends. An adult who loves chemistry (and shows it) will be far more effective in teaching and motivating students to study than someone who teaches it reluctantly or hesitantly. Although some children are more easily inspired than others, all children can be inspired with this form of relevancy, which is powerful and important as we design and implement educational opportunities for our children.

But, let's face it: some things are just not going to be intrinsically relevant, nor will it be possible to make them interesting to everyone. While there are exceptions, most children find things like memorizing multiplication facts, drilling spelling words, or completing grammar workbooks to be rather meaningless in their lives. The intrinsic relevancy is just not there, nor is it likely to be inspired, so we must apply the third form of relevancy, contrived relevancy, and make learning into a game. Sometimes it's a very small shift. For example, "Find and underline all the prepositional phrases in this paragraph" sounds like a tedious and useless chore. However, to say "There are seventeen prepositional phrases in this paragraph. Here's a list of prepositions. Find them all, and you win!" is a whole different activity. I'm a boy, and I really couldn't care less about prepositions, but I love to win, and if you set it up so that I can win, I'm much more likely to play your game—and possibly learn something about prepositional phrases in the process, especially since I'm happier to be doing it and therefore more receptive.

However, any game or economic system you may create as an external or contrived motivator must have two elements: it must be possible to win, and it must have both potential gain and potential loss. If children believe (or come to believe through multiple failures) that they cannot win, they will not play, and you will be forced to resort to the last and least effective form of

relevancy. Therefore, children must know that it is possible for them to win, and this usually happens because of previous successes. Secondly, there must be not only a reward for winning, but also a penalty for losing. If we try to motivate only by offering a reward for effort, children may decide that the prizes just are not worth the work, in which case you will be tempted to offer a bigger carrot, thereby creating a new game—one which you don't want to play—called “How High Can I Bid Mom and Dad Up By Continuing to Refuse Their Offers.” If your game has only negative consequences, your children may think along these lines: “Well, I'll suffer if I do this, and I'll suffer if I don't, so who cares. Life right now is all about misery, so I'll just go eat worms and die.” So whether you use computer game minutes, chocolate, points, marbles, or dollars, there must be a potential reward for working and winning, and a potential penalty or fine for refusing to do so and losing. Contrived relevancy—usually in the form of a game—can be effective in motivating children to do hard things that they are not otherwise inspired to do.

The last and least effective form is, of course, enforced relevancy. Unfortunately, however, this is the method we are most likely to use as this method was often used on us. The lecture often goes like this: “You must study and get a good grade on this test, or you will not get a good grade in the class, which will bring down your GPA on your transcript, and then you won't get into a good college, and you'll never get a good job, and you'll suffer misery and poverty your whole life—so study! Now!” As I noted above, this type of motivation can give the appearance of learning, but no real lasting learning is likely to occur. What has been retained long enough for the test will be lost almost immediately unless some other form of relevancy appears. It is also inefficient. I know some boys who can take ninety minutes and shed many tears before finally deciding to finish copying their short paragraph because the threat of “no dinner until you finish” (or some similar punishment) causes them to finally do it—but with a rebellious attitude and certainly a lasting dislike of the activity. However, most of those boys, given a time limit, and a potential gain if they can accomplish it before time is up, would be willing to forgo the eighty minutes of procrastination, antics, excuses, and tears. Then the aftertaste of the task is one of lowered pain and greater success; willingness to do it again will grow. Therefore, we as parents and teachers should always try to avoid using the last and least effective motivator—enforced relevancy.

In summary, *relevancy* is paramount. If something is relevant, it can be more easily learned; if it is not, everything is harder for both the adult and the student. Whenever possible, capitalize on intrinsic interests, be inspiring (or find people who are), contrive a game that can be won, and shun “gun to the head” enforcement. In other words, “Inspire, not Require.” Strive for this, and everyone will be happier, accomplishing so much more.