

Contents

- ▶ Motivation is 'our reason for doing'
- ▶ Children's motivation develops through positive experiences
- ▶ To praise or not to praise?
- ▶ Supporting children's motivation
- ▶ Motivation in the early years

Motivation is 'our reason for doing'

Motivation is what drives us to act in order to achieve our goals.

We can be self-motivated when we give ourselves rewards such as when we:

- ▶ feel pleasure and pride
- ▶ feel good about ourselves, our efforts and what we have achieved.

Children who are self-motivated tend to stick at things for longer. They feel a sense of control over what they are doing and like challenges. When children feel they can achieve their goals, they feel good about themselves which benefits their mental health and wellbeing.



Children can also be motivated by being rewarded by others (e.g., by receiving praise, having a trip to the park, or spending time with friends). This does not mean motivating children requires adults to reward them each time they do something well. Sometimes, rewarding children can make them feel they need to do things well in order to get someone else's approval. As a consequence they may avoid activities and this can lead to a reduced sense of control and lowered self-confidence. Children who are self-motivated tend to do things simply because they enjoy doing them. Sometimes we can influence children's motivation by making them feel they need a reward for everything they do.

Children's motivation develops through positive experiences

Babies are born with a drive to explore and learn about their environment. Most babies are highly motivated. They want to respond to anything new in their surroundings. As children begin to realise their actions have certain outcomes, they start to develop a sense of control and mastery (e.g., when I touch the mobile, the ornaments light up; when I cry, daddy comes). This makes babies feel capable and good about themselves which motivates them to try more things. As their confidence grows they become more capable, self-sufficient and self-motivated. They are not motivated by rewards from others, but by the sheer delight of seeing that their behaviour has an effect on something or someone.

Children can become self-motivated when their natural curiosity is encouraged and supported. Children who are self-motivated have better mental health and wellbeing than those who rely on being rewarded by others to feel good about themselves.



To praise or not to praise?

Gaining approval from important adults in their lives becomes more important to children as they grow. Praising and rewarding children for their achievements are often used to increase children's motivation. Praise is more effective when it is specific and when parents and carers are mindful of how and when they praise. When praising children, it is most important to focus on their efforts and achievements. Praise that is specific and acknowledges the processes of completing an activity or solving a problem helps develop children's learning and motivation. Examples of specific praise are 'You put away your toys so nicely' or 'You've used so many bright colours in your painting'.

It is important to remember some children rely on adults to motivate them and do not have their own motivation. In this case, children may become dependent on others for feeling good and may give up easily. For example, some children may come to expect and need compliments to feel good about something they have done. If we feel we have less control over what we are doing we feel less motivated.

Praising children for their efforts is motivating as it teaches them what they're doing well. They can then use this learning when they have similar experiences in the future. For example, a parent or carer might say, 'I noticed you were really trying hard at building that block tower' or 'Wow, look how smoothly you're rolling out that playdough'. This kind of praise is effective as it refers to the process of completing an activity. Saying things to children such as 'You are a good girl for picking up your toys' focuses on the child's sense of self as being good or bad rather than the process of the activity. Such comments may make children (especially older children) relate how they feel about who they are to their achievements. They might assume they are a bad girl or boy because they haven't solved a problem or completed an activity.

Effective praise can motivate children.

Giving praise effectively

Praise and rewards both motivate and de-motivate children, depending on how they are used. When and how children have been praised may be one reason why they differ in their levels of confidence and motivation. Below are some examples of how praise can be done well and not so well.

Ineffective praise	Effective praise
<p>Evaluates children</p> <p>'You're a good counter Libby.'</p>	<p>Acknowledges children</p> <p>'You're excited about doing counting today Libby.'</p>
<p>Is general</p> <p>'Great work on the painting Evonne.'</p>	<p>Is specific</p> <p>'You have used so many colours in your painting Evonne.'</p>
<p>Compares children with one another</p> <p>'Look at how Libby used all the page in her drawing Evonne.'</p>	<p>Compares how children are going with how they have performed in the past</p> <p>'You have drawn on so much more of your page than last time Evonne.'</p>
<p>Giving children rewards for the outcome</p> <p>'You caught the ball Libby, you deserve a star.'</p>	<p>Links children's activities with the feelings of enjoyment they experience while doing them</p> <p>'You tried to catch the ball three times Libby, you seem pleased that you did so well.'</p>
<p>Links children's success to how easy the task was</p> <p>'You found Evonne because she hid in her favourite hiding spot.'</p>	<p>Links children's success the effort they put into an activity</p> <p>'You thought long and hard about where Evonne might be hiding, then you remembered she likes to hide in the cubby house and you found her ... good thinking!'</p>

Praise should be given mindfully and take into account a child's age and abilities. Children can pick up when we are not genuine, especially if we use the same words of praise over and over again. The timing of praise is also important, interrupting a child when they are concentrating can make them lose their focus and reduce their motivation to continue on with the activity.



Supporting children's motivation

Parents and carers play an important role in supporting the development of motivation in young children. Children feel safe and free to explore when they have warm and trusting relationships with significant adults in their lives. Recognising children's efforts rather than their achievements supports the development of children's self-motivation.

What motivates children changes as they get older. Arranging developmentally appropriate experiences for children gives them many opportunities to experience success and mastery through their effort which will help to keep them motivated. Experiences should be pitched at the right level, not too hard, but not too easy either. Activities need to be challenging enough to maintain children's attention and require persistent effort to achieve success. Children may become bored if things are too easy. However, if things are too challenging, children can become disheartened and begin to give up. They may not be motivated to try if they don't think they can do it.

Scaffolding supports learning and motivation

Scaffolding is a term used to describe the process by which parents and carers support children's learning and motivation. Like scaffolding used at a building site, parents and carers act as a scaffold to support children's learning by coming up with possible solutions to a problem together. When this relationship is warm and trusting it provides children with a safe space to work on an activity or figure out how to solve a problem. Parents or carers can support problem solving by using prompt questions that allow children to find solutions to a problem. As children become more confident in their problem solving, parents and carers can gradually step back and reduce their level of participation. For example, a preschooler who is becoming frustrated trying to learn how to tie shoelaces can be supported by an adult. A parent or carer might choose to sit behind a child to see the shoes from the child's view and provide encouraging statements when a child loops a shoelace the right way. An adult might also prompt the child to think of solutions, for example, 'It looks like the left lace is shorter than the right one. Where should the right lace go so they are the same length?'

Children remain more engaged in activities when parents and carers help them along to reaching a goal.



Motivation in the early years

Motivation in babies (birth to around 18 months)

Babies are becoming familiar with their surroundings and those around them. They seek attention by smiling, cooing, babbling and crying. Much of what infants can do is related to their movement. They begin with random movements and then move to more purposeful actions such as grasping objects, crawling, pulling themselves up to stand and walking. They are very curious and like to explore.

What kind of experiences may support babies developing motivation?

Motivation in toddlers (around 18 months to three years)

Toddlers are continuing to explore their environment. They are also becoming better at deciding what to do to achieve their goals. As toddlers get older, they start developing an understanding for self-awareness and self-evaluation and understand that there are a number of steps involved in reaching goals.

Children around three years old are not only interested in completing an activity, they also like doing it well. They are discovering which activities are easier or harder for them. Toddlers feel a lot of pride when they succeed in completing a challenging activity. If a challenging activity doesn't work out this is a learning opportunity and they don't feel much shame. However, if they view a task to be easy, they feel greater shame. This is why it is especially important to provide toddlers with support and encouragement after facing a challenging activity and less so after successes.

Giving children opportunities to accomplish tasks on their own encourages motivation. Parents and carers can provide scaffolding for the task if support is required by the child. As children feel more capable of completing activities on their own, parents and carers can reduce their involvement.

What kind of experiences could you provide to motivate toddlers?



Motivation in preschoolers (around three to five years)

Preschoolers are beginning to direct their own learning as they are becoming more capable of problem solving and working through activities on their own. They are more able to think through how they are going to complete an activity. Many times we might expect children to work quietly at a task on their own; however, encouraging children to talk with others about what they are doing promotes their learning and development. By being shown how to work through problems with the help of supportive adults, preschoolers are more able to scaffold their own learning. With this comes a greater sense of control over what they are doing, leading to greater confidence and self-esteem.

How could you encourage preschoolers to motivate each other?

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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