

**Prepared for:**

**United Independent School District  
Laredo, Texas**



# 7

## **Proven Ways to Motivate Children To Do Better in School**

**One of a series of Parent Guides from**



## **Parent Guide**

# **Seven Proven Ways to Motivate Children**

To Do Better in School

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## **Table of Contents**

Introduction .....	.2
1. Set Proper Expectations .....	.3
2. Help Your Child Set Goals .....	.4
3. Show Your Child that You Think School is Important .....	.5
4. Support Your Child's Learning Style .....	.6
5. Speak the Language of Encouragement .....	.8
6. Reinforce Learning at Home and in the Community .....	.9
7. Encourage Your Child to Be Resilient .....	.10
What About Rewards? .....	.11
Conclusion .....	.11
For More Information .....	.12
Other Parent Guides Available From The Parent Institute .....	.13

## Introduction

“It’s not that I’m so smart,” Albert Einstein once said, “It’s just that I stay with problems longer.”

How telling that one of the greatest geniuses of all time explained his success in this way. Einstein gave the credit not to his superior intellect, but to his tremendous persistence. He was *motivated*.

Of course, not everyone can come up with a theory that will forever change science. But everyone can use motivation to achieve personal success, beginning from an early age. Research has plainly shown that motivated children do better in school—not necessarily because they feel they have to be *the* best, but because they are trying *their* best.

### A motivated child is likely to:

- Choose tasks that are challenging.
- Begin tasks without having to be prodded.
- Show serious effort and concentration.
- Have a positive attitude toward learning and schoolwork.
- Use coping strategies to get through the rough times
- Stick with tasks until successful completion.

### A child who is not motivated is likely to:

- Choose work that is inappropriately easy.
- Need lots of prodding to get started.
- Put in minimal effort.
- Show a negative or apathetic attitude about learning and schoolwork.
- Give up quickly when the going gets rough.
- Leave many tasks unfinished.

Based on these characteristics, it is not difficult to see why motivated students are more successful! Motivated students can rightly take credit for their own achievements, but most of them also owe a debt to the people who started them out on the right path—their parents. As a parent you have a large role to play in whether or not your child will be motivated to do his best in school. In the end, it’s up to him—but you can create an encouraging environment.

This guide will help you do that. There are many ways to motivate children based on their temperament. However, this guide will spotlight seven ways proven to work for nearly every child. Implement these ideas, and you will assure your child of your loving support—and that may be the best motivation your child could ever receive.



*\*Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

## 1

## Set Proper Expectations

Expect your child to succeed, and her chances for success improve greatly. Expect her to come up short, and the odds are that she will. Children are usually keenly aware of how their parents view them, and they often tailor their actions to those views. So it's very important to have high expectations—and communicate them to your child. It's equally important to base your expectations on your child as an individual who has strengths and weaknesses like all individuals.

Set appropriate expectations by:

- **Communicating with your child.**

Talk kindly but honestly with your child about where she thinks her interests and abilities are, and where she thinks she has less interest and ability. Then share your own opinions, based on your observation of your child. Look for common ground, but never dismiss your child's self-assessment as inappropriate or unrealistic. Those areas that both you and your child view as her strengths may represent the areas where she will truly shine. These should be the focus of your highest expectations for achievement. On the other hand, those areas where you both agree she struggles should be the focus of different expectations. Here, make it clear that you expect to see her top effort. If the effort expectation is met, then she has succeeded. It is natural to be concerned with results. But if you look only at the final product, you might miss the enormous amount of work that went into every step.

- **Re-evaluating as necessary.** Your child will grow and change, and so will her interests and abilities. Plan to review expectations with your child about every three months (more frequently if needed). Talk often and make adjustments if you and your child agree that any of your expectations were too low—or too ambitious for the moment.



## Help Your Child Set Goals

# 2

Goals turn expectations from ideas into reality. Knowing what he is expected to do will help your child accomplish little unless he has a plan for how to do it. Here are some ways to help your child set meaningful goals:

- **Write the goals down.** Research shows that we are more likely to accomplish written goals than those we merely talk about, perhaps because written goals provide a visual reminder of what we need to do. So don't let your child hide his list of goals in his desk drawer. Post them in a prominent spot—such as a kitchen wall—where he can refer to them often.
- **Make the goals specific.** “Connor will do better in math next quarter,” is a difficult goal to achieve. What does doing “better” mean? What steps will he need to take to achieve this “better” performance? But change the goal to “Connor will raise his math grade from a C to a B,” and then the child knows exactly what is expected of him. The goal doesn't stand on its own, however. Connor still needs a map to get there. “To accomplish his goal, Connor will do the following: 1) review math problems 20 minutes each night, whether or not he has an upcoming quiz; 2) stay after school once a week for Ms. Stephens' math enrichment class; 3) ask Mom to give him a practice math test every Thursday.”
- **Make the goals measurable.** A measurable goal allows you and your child to chart his progress. For example, you can tell whether Connor is on his way to raising his grade by whether he is finishing homework with less difficulty and whether his marks on math quizzes are steadily improving. If there's no way to check progress, the goal is not measurable. Change it.

### Five Steps to Help Your Child Accomplish Nearly Anything

Parents know, and children soon find out, that there is a big difference between wanting to do something and actually getting it done.

Here are five steps parents can use to help children do something they want to accomplish. Experts say the likelihood of success increases with each additional step they take.

#### Steps and the Likelihood of Success for Each:

Make a conscious decision to do something .....	25%
Decide when they will do it .....	40%
Plan how they will do it.....	50%
Commit to someone else that they will do it .....	65%
Make a specific future appointment with the person they committed to, at which time they report whether they've done it .....	95%

## 3

**Show Your Child You Think School is Important**

Taking time to set expectations and goals with your child clearly communicates your interest in helping her to be her best. Build on that by showing your enthusiasm for education in a variety of ways. These include:

- **Maintaining a relationship with your child's teacher.** Tell the teacher about your expectations and your child's goals. Ask her for suggestions on achieving them. Also ask the teacher to clearly state her own expectations and goals for your child. Agree on a way for the two of you to exchange information about your child. After an initial face-to-face meeting, many teachers and parents find that email is an efficient way to keep in touch.
- **Supporting the programs at your child's school.** Attending events such as back-to-school night, conferences, plays and family math night show your child that being at school is a priority for you. If schedule and resources allow, also consider volunteering at school and participating in school fundraisers.
- **Creating a suitable environment** for homework. Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to study. Ask her to let you know which supplies she needs, and offer to pick them up for her. Be available during homework time to look over homework and give suggestions, but never do your child's homework for her. If your child has difficulty doing his homework, write a note to her teacher explaining the problem.
- **Keeping up with your child's assignments.** Doing school work is your child's responsibility, but you should be aware of what she is studying as well as the status of homework assignments, tests and class projects.
- **Staying positive about school and schoolwork.** You may not always think so, but your attitude does rub off on your child. Whenever possible, mention that the latest social studies unit sounds interesting or that the upcoming field trip should be exciting. Say a good word about your child's teacher, too. "I really like the way Mr. Thomas always sends home a study guide before your science tests. I know it helps you to feel more prepared."



## Support Your Child's Learning Style

# 4

Your child is more likely to want to learn if he uses the learning style that feels most natural and makes the most sense—to him. Help him figure out, and use, his best learning style.

Does your child learn best by:

- **Hearing**, such as listening to a talk or a book on tape? If so, he may be an auditory learner. He enjoys music and hearing stories. He can probably follow oral directions very well. He is comfortable talking. He would probably prefer spelling his words aloud to the teacher to taking a written quiz.
- **Seeing**, such as reading a book or a graph? If so, he may be a visual learner. He appreciates artwork, movies and the live theater. He can probably follow a map like a pro. He likes to have something written on paper to back up oral lessons. He would probably prefer studying a chart of the times tables to repeating them out loud with the class.
- **Doing**, such as building a model or preparing a chart? If so, he may be a kinesthetic learner. He loves to move, making recess and exercise critical parts of his school day. He would much rather participate than sit and watch. He likes using his hands to create things. He is probably much happier during his hands-on science lab than he is during the theory lesson that preceded it.

### Auditory Learners

Auditory learners feel motivated and engaged when they can incorporate more listening into schoolwork. Here are good ways to motivate an auditory learner:

- **Have your child record himself reading** a chapter out loud. Then review by listening to it.
- **Use rhymes, songs, and associative words** (letters or words that make you think of other words) to remember facts. Example: **M**y **V**ery **E**xcellent **M**other **J**ust **S**erved **U**s **N**ine **P**izzas to remember **M**ercury, **V**enus, **E**arth, **M**ars, **J**upiter, **S**aturn, **U**ranus, **N**eptune and **P**luto.
- **Have him ask friends and family members to give you an oral quiz** or listen to you recite math facts.
- **When assigned to read fiction**, suggest that he see if a book on tape is available. He can follow along in the book as he listens.
- **Suggest that he “talk himself” through a problem.** “Let’s see, multiply and divide before you add and subtract. So the first thing I need to do is multiply two times six ... .”

## Visual Learners

Visual learners feel more motivated and engaged when they can incorporate more seeing into their schoolwork. Here are some ways to motivate a visual learner:

- **Help him use color** wherever possible. Take notes using different colored pens. Write spelling words and key concepts in “rainbow style”—write each word three times, first in red, then in orange, then in blue. Highlight important passages in stand-out tones, such as bright pink.
- **When reading a text**, suggest that he first go through and look at all the pictures, charts, graphs and diagrams in the chapter. Which points are they illustrating? Suggest that he use the illustrations to reinforce what he is reading.
- **Help him make a study wall.** Each week, help him make a poster of something he needs to learn and post it in that spot. Have him refer to it often.
- **Flashcards are great** for visual learners. Suggest that he use them for math facts, vocabulary words, anything he needs to memorize.
- **Talk with him about staying** attentive during oral presentations by watching the speaker. If he is a visual learner, allowing his eyes to drift toward the window or door is a sure way to miss most of what is being said.

## Kinesthetic Learners

Kinesthetic learners feel more motivated and engaged when they can incorporate more doing into their schoolwork. Try these ideas to motivate a kinesthetic learner:

- **Help him look for ways** to make learning hands-on. Use counters to learn addition and subtraction, divide objects into halves, thirds and fourths to teach fractions. Learn spelling words by manipulating alphabet blocks into place.
- **Urge him to combine study breaks** with physical activity. Suggest that he study for 30 minutes, then go for a short run (about 10 minutes) and then come back to study.
- **Give him as much room** as possible when studying. Many kinesthetic learners like to pace the floor while memorizing. They also like to study in non-sitting positions, such as standing up or lying down.
- **Help him with reading comprehension** by having him tell you about or act out a passage from a book. Be his audience or play a role yourself.
- **Encourage him to do hands-on projects.** Kinesthetic learners can shine at science fairs and art shows because they love to create things. Participation in these events can boost your child’s self-esteem, which can in turn boost his motivation.

## 5

**Speak the Language of Encouragement**

Most parents enjoy praising their children with words like “good job!” and “that looks great!” But research shows that encouragement that has a bigger effect than praise on a child’s motivation.

So, what is the difference between praise and encouragement? They do sound like the same thing—but they are not.

**Praise:**

- **Discusses results.** “Great work on the science quiz! You got an A!”
- **Uses opinion words** such as “good,” “great,” “terrific,” and “wonderful.”
- **Is typically given** when the child has performed as you had hoped she would.

**Encouragement:**

- **Notices effort and progress.** “Look at that paper! I can tell you’ve spent a lot of time on it! It must feel good to know you worked so hard!”
- **Uses descriptive words.** “You cleaned the bathroom without being asked. Look at that shiny sink! I can see myself in it!”
- **Can be given regardless of the child’s performance.** “That didn’t work out the way you planned, did it? I can tell you’re disappointed, but I know you’ll try again next week. What do you think you might do differently next time?”



The big difference is that words of praise lead the child to rely on your assessment of her accomplishments, while words of encouragement lead her to form her own positive assessment of herself. Encouragement makes motivation soar!

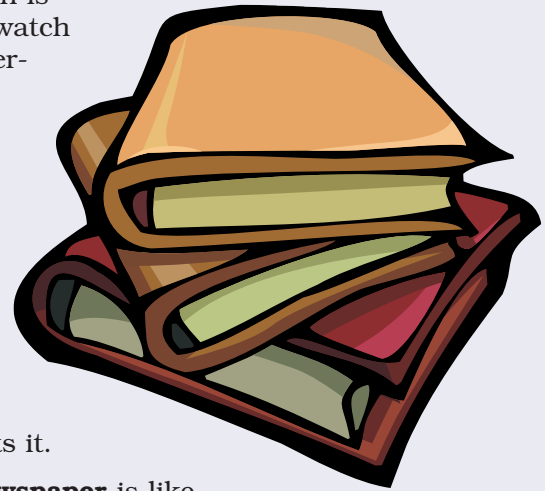
## Reinforce Learning at Home and in the Community

# 6

Learning becomes drudgery if your child sees it only as something that happens while he is sitting at a desk. Motivated students know that learning takes place everywhere. They realize that many of the activities that can increase their knowledge and understanding are also lots of fun.

Use your imagination and creativity to make learning come alive for your child! Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- **When your child reads a classic**, see if a video version is available. After he reads the book, rent the video and watch it as a family. Ask your child to tell you about the differences he notices between the two. Don't forget the popcorn!
- **Dive into the cultures your child studies**. A wonderful way to do this is through food. Eat at a restaurant that serves the food of the culture. Or get on the Internet and search for some recipes then try preparing the food yourself.
- **Expand your child's point of view** by taking him to something that doesn't fit with his typical tastes. If he loves basketball, take him to the ballet. Point out that athleticism might be found where he least expects it.
- **Getting your child into the habit of reading the newspaper** is like giving him a gift that will last his whole life. Clip relevant articles for him, or read bits of articles out loud. Broadcast news may be up to the second, but it can rarely provide the depth of information and perspective that the newspaper can.



- **Museum visits are always fun**, but they are especially appropriate when your child is studying science and social studies. Taking your child to an exhibit on rockets, dinosaurs or life in ancient Mali will give his schoolwork a new dimension. Instead of looking at a picture in a book, he can experience life-size replicas of what he has read about.



## 7

**Encourage Your Child to Be Resilient**

Sam Goldstein, Ph.D., a noted neuropsychologist and professor at the University of Utah, strongly believes that encouraging resilience is one of the best things parents can do for their children.

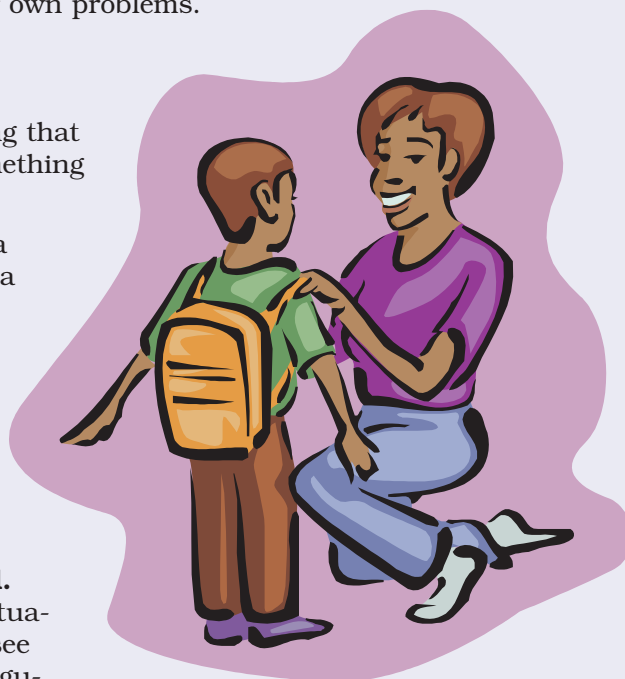
Resilient children are ready for whatever life throws at them. They get that way, according to Goldstein, by developing qualities like these:

- **Strong belief** that an adult in their lives will always be there with love and support.
- **Ability to solve** many of their own problems.
- **Ability to focus** on their own strengths.
- **Regard mistakes** as something that happens to everyone, and something to learn from.

These characteristics show that a resilient child is also likely to be a motivated child. When a child is not resilient, believing she has no strengths to harness to help her bounce back from adversity, her motivation will drop sharply.

Encourage your child to be resilient by:

- **Empathizing with your child.** Before acting, try to see the situation through her eyes. “I can see you’re very upset about the argument you had with your sister, but hitting is unacceptable even when we are feeling upset. Can you think of a better way to show your feelings?”
- **Providing your child with reasonable choices.** “Breakfast will be ready in 20 minutes. Would you like toast or eggs today?”
- **Changing your approach when it clearly doesn’t work.** You complain your child doesn’t listen, so you yell louder. She tunes you out. Instead of continuing to yell, try something different. Turn her face to yours, and whisper. You may surprise her into paying attention.
- **Supporting your child’s interests and talents.** If your child is struggling in school, her part in the school musical may be the only thing saving her self-esteem. Celebrate this talent. Never take it away from her “until you bring up those grades.”



### What about rewards?

Parents and teachers alike often use rewards to motivate children to do better in school. These rewards include classroom awards, stickers, candy and extra privileges. Experts disagree about this. Some say rewards teach children to work only for what they can get out of it, instead of working for internal satisfaction. But others say offering occasional rewards is realistic. After all, most adults do not go to their jobs each day only for internal satisfaction. They go because they need a paycheck to support themselves and their families.

The best approach may be to simply take a middle ground. Treat your child to a reward once in awhile, but other times reward him only with a smile or a big thumbs-up. Or tell him: "You can really be proud of yourself. Look what you did!"

### Conclusion

Given the choice between ability and hard work as the most important key to success in school (and in life), experts say hard work is hands-down the most important. By finding ways to motivate a child to work hard and make the most of her educational opportunities, parents can help their child use whatever strengths and abilities she has now or can develop in the future.

Striking the spark that motivates a child produces an internally fueled quest for success that no amount of external rewards, threats or pleas can equal. Motivation is truly the secret to helping children develop their greatest potential and parents would do well to learn how to do it. The ideas in the guide are a great way to start.



## For More Information

### ***Bright Minds, Poor Grades: Understanding and Motivating Your Underachieving Child***

by Michael D. Whitley, Ph.D.

Perigee Books

1-800-788-6262

[www.penguininputnam.com](http://www.penguininputnam.com)

### ***Dreamers, Discoverers and Dynamos : How to Help the Child Who Is Bright, Bored and Having Problems in School***

by Lucy Jo Palladino, Ph.D.

Ballantine Books

1-800-726-0600

[www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com)

### ***Helping Students Develop Self-Motivation: A Sourcebook for Parents and Educators***

by Donald R. Grossnickle

National Association of Secondary School

Principals

### ***Homework Without Tears: A Parent's Guide for Motivating Children to do Homework and to Succeed in School.***

by Lee Canter and Lee Hausner, Ph.D.

Harper Collins

1-800-242-7737

[www.harpercollins.com/hc](http://www.harpercollins.com/hc)

### ***"Increasing Student Engagement and Motivation: From Time-on-Task to Homework"***

by Cori Brewster and Jennifer Fager

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

[www.nwrel.org/request/oct00/textonly.html](http://www.nwrel.org/request/oct00/textonly.html)

### ***"Motivating Kids to Read"***

Reading is Fundamental

[www.rif.org/parents/motivate/default.msp](http://www.rif.org/parents/motivate/default.msp).

### ***Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning***

by Deborah Stipek Ph.D. and Kathy Seal

Owl Books

1-800-488-5233

[www.henryholt.com](http://www.henryholt.com)

### ***"Motivating Students"***

by Barbara Gross Davis

University of Hawaii Honolulu Community College

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/motiv.htm>

### ***"Motivating students to improve achievement"***

by Dr. Michael Whitley

CNN.Com

[http://archives.cnn.com/2001/](http://archives.cnn.com/2001/COMMUNITY/08/29/whitley)

[COMMUNITY/08/29/whitley](http://archives.cnn.com/2001/COMMUNITY/08/29/whitley)

### ***"Questions and Answers about Resilience"***

by Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

Sam Goldstein.com

[www.samgoldstein.com/articles/articles29.pdf](http://www.samgoldstein.com/articles/articles29.pdf)

### ***Raising Lifelong Learners: A Parents' Guide***

by Lucy McCormick Calkins and Lydia Bellino

Perseus Books

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[www.perseusbooksgroup.com](http://www.perseusbooksgroup.com)

### ***Seven Times Smarter : 50 Activities, Games, and Projects to Develop the Seven Intelligences of Your Child***

by Laurel Schmidt

Three Rivers Press

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[www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com)

### ***Solve Your Child's School-Related Problems***

by Michael Martin & Cynthia Waltman-Greenwood

HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

1-800-242-7737

[www.harpercollins.com/hc](http://www.harpercollins.com/hc)

### ***"The Parent's Toolshop: The Universal Blueprint for Building a Healthy Family"***

Jodi Johnston Pawel

Ambris Publishing

1-888-415-1212

[www.parentstoolshop.com](http://www.parentstoolshop.com)

### ***"Top Ten Ways to Motivate Students"***

by John Bishop

National PTA

1-800-307-4PTA

[www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/helpchild/10motivate.asp](http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/helpchild/10motivate.asp)

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