**Unmotivated Child? 6 Ways to Get Your Child Going By** [**Debbie Pincus, MS LMHC**](https://www.empoweringparents.com/blog/author/debbiepincus/)

AddThis Sharing Buttons

Share to Facebook**512**Share to Pinterest**245**Share to PrintShare to EmailShare to More**2.2K**

Why is it so hard to motivate kids? As parents, we often have a funny, inaccurate belief that our children won’t care unless we twist their arms. But the simple truth is that your attempts to motivate your child are probably working against you. You can’t make your child care just because you do—in fact, you might actually get in the way of their motivation. What’s worse, the push-pull of trying to motivate your child usually turns into a power struggle. There’s something wrong with the picture if you care more about your child’s grades than he does.

If you’ve been getting in your child’s “box” and trying to make him care because you do, it’s important to stop and ask yourself this question, “What’s my child’s responsibility here? What’s mine?” If your child isn’t getting his work done, your job as a parent is to hold him accountable and teach him how the real world works. In the real world, if you don’t finish your work, you won’t get paid. Give consequences to show your child what the result of his poor choices are, but don’t confuse the reason for doing this with thinking you’ll make him care about his math homework simply because *you* care about it. Consequences aren’t there to create motivation; you give them because you’re doing your job as a parent. The bottom line is that you can’t motivate another person to care. Your role, rather, is to inspire and influence.

As parents, we often feel responsible for our child’s outcome in life, but understand that this is never the case—ultimately; *your child* is responsible for his own choices. But because we think our kids’ success depends on us, we step into a place where we don’t belong. We’re taught that we need to somehow control our kids, so we often jump in their box without a second thought. We think we’re supposed to motivate our children to want certain things in life, but that only causes them to function in reaction to you. Your child might comply to get you off his back or even to please you, but that doesn’t help him get self-motivated. Again, you definitely want to inspire and influence your child. The goal is the same: we want our kids to be motivated—it’s how we get there that makes the difference.

**I’m trying to Motivate Him. Why Isn’t It Working?**

The truth of the matter is, some children are less motivated than others. There are kids who are smart as a whip but who get report cards with D’s and F’s. Some sit in the classroom gazing into space despite the teacher’s—and your—best efforts. Maybe you have a child who forgets his assignments or worse, does them and never turns them in. Or you might have a pre-teen who doesn’t seem interested in anything and has no real hobbies or passions. Maybe your teen gives up easily or doesn’t want to try. In spite of your best efforts, he remains stuck or is starting to fall behind. (If you have other concerns, be sure to have the school and/or your child’s pediatrician rule out learning disabilities, ADHD/ADD, depression, addictions and other conditions.)

If your child is one of the less motivated, it can be a source of great worry and frustration and sometimes even despair—and that’s where the trouble can begin. The trouble in this case is your *reaction* to your child’s lack of motivation, not the lack of motivation itself. When you get nervous about him, you try to motivate him from the grip of your own anxiety, and forget that it’s just not possible to make someone care.

Ask yourself these questions:

* Does your worry compel you to nag, hover, push, cajole, or over-function for your child?
* Does your frustration cause you to yell, scream, beg, punish, and throw your hands up in despair?
* Does your helplessness cause you to start fighting with your spouse, who never seems to do as much as you think he or she should do to get your child motivated?
* Does your fear about your child’s underachieving cause you to keep trying to get him to change and to be more motivated?

If you find yourself doing any of the above, you’ve probably seen your child resist, comply to get you off his back, rebel, or dig in his heels harder. Let me be clear: Whether he fights you or goes along with what you want, the end result is that he will be no more motivated than he was before. You might eventually get him to do what you want, but your goal of helping him be self-motivated is still a far away reality.

**My child just isn’t motivated to do anything.**

If you’ve ruled out learning disabilities and [behavioral disorders](http://www.empoweringparents.com/conditions-diagnoses/) and your child still isn’t participating in family life, and isn’t doing chores or homework, somehow you probably aren’t holding him to the line. In that case, you need to hold him accountable and provide the consequences that will guide him to the right place. You’ll get the video game once you get your homework and chores done. Do this along with standing back enough to find out who your child is. If he doesn’t seem to get up on time, step back a little bit and see what his sleep patterns seem to be. If there’s a particular chore he dislikes, you might talk to him and see if he and a sibling could switch tasks. I’m not saying we have to suit everybody’s desires but it’s not bad to check in and see what they might do better with. Maybe your son hates loading the dishwasher but would like to cook dinner because he’s interested in becoming a chef. In this way, you’re helping your child see himself and define himself. Get out of his way and really see him, and then get out of his head so he can think for himself. At the same time, hold him accountable to the basic things that he needs to do in life.

**How do you inspire your kids to motivate themselves?** (Here are a few tips to help you influence them towards self-motivation.)

**1. Don’t let your anxiety push them to get motivated.** You will only motivate them to resist you or to comply to calm you down because they want you to leave them alone. This won’t motivate them as much as teaching them how to appease or resist you. It then becomes about reacting to you instead of focusing on themselves and finding some internal motivation. Your anxiety and need for them to care will just create a power struggle between you and your child.

**2. Be inspiring.** The only way to motivate is to stop trying to motivate. Instead, work towards inspiring your child. How do you do that? Be an inspiring person. Ask yourself if your behaviors are inspiring or controlling. Understand that your kids will want to run the other way if you’re too controlling. Think about someone in your own life who is inspiring to you, and work towards that goal. Remember, the only thing you’ll motivate if you’re pushing your child is the motivation to resist you.

**3. Let your child make his own choices—and face the consequences.** Let your child make his own choices. When it’s a poor choice, hold him accountable by letting him face the [natural consequences](http://www.empoweringparents.com/The-Benefits-of-Natural-Consequences.php) that come with it. If the consequence of not doing his homework is that the computer is taken away, put the need to get that computer time back in his hands. If he finishes his work, he gets the time on the computer you’ve agreed upon. That will be a motivation for him in the right direction without you telling him what to do, how to do it, and lecturing him on why he should care. As a parent, what you’re actually doing is asking yourself, “What will I put up with? What are my values and principles?” and you’re sticking to them.

**4. Ask yourself these questions:**

* What motivates my child?
* What does he really want?
* What questions can I ask that will help him discover and explore his interests?
* What are his goals and ambitions?

Step far enough away to see your child as a separate person. Then observe what you see. Talk to him to find the answers to the questions above. And then listen—not to what *you* want the answers to be, but to what your child is saying. Just listen to *him*. Respect his answers, even if you disagree.

**5. Choose which door you want to enter.** Imagine two doors. Door number one is for the parent who wants to get their kids motivated and do the right thing in life: Get up, go to school, get their work done, be successful. Door number two is for parents who want their kids to be self-motivated to do those things. They want to influence their child to work toward the things they’re interested in. To not only do the right thing but to *want* to do the right things.

Which door would you enter? If it’s door number one, then the way to achieve that goal is push, punish, beg, nag, bribe, reward, and cajole. If you decide on door number two, then you’ll reach that goal by asking different kinds of questions. Rather than, “Did you get your homework done?” you might say, “Why did you decide to do your homework today and not yesterday? I noticed you chose not to do geometry yesterday, but you’re doing your history homework today. What’s the difference?” Be an investigator, exploring and uncovering, helping your child discover his own motivations and sticking points.

**6. It’s not your fault.** Remember, your child’s lack of motivation is not your fault, so don’t personalize it. When you do this, you may actually contribute to the underachieving by creating more resistance.

Look at it this way. If you look too closely in the mirror, you can’t really see yourself—it’s just a blur. But when you get farther away, you actually see yourself more clearly. Do the same thing with your child. Sometimes we’re just so close, so enmeshed, that we just can’t see them as separate from us. But if you can stand back far enough, you can actually start to see your child as his own person and start to find out what makes him tick—and then you’ll be able to help him understand himself as well. When you step back and observe, you’ll know what works for him, why he’s reaching for certain things and what really gets him moving. There will be things he’s never going to be motivated to do but is still required to them. He may hate doing his chores and try to get out of it, and that’s when you give him consequences.

**The goal is to influence your child when he has to do something he doesn’t want to do, and get to know him well enough to figure out what his own desires might be.** As a parent, you want to strengthen his skills in defining what’s important to him. You want to help your child define for himself who he is, what’s important to him and what he’s going to do to make those things happen. Our responsibility is to help our kids do that, not to do it for them. We need to stay out of their way enough so they can figure out who they are, what they think and where their own interests lie.