

The Disengaged Student



"School is so bo-o-o-ring."

Sound familiar? Every child seems to lose interest in school once in a while. But some children *never* show an interest in schoolwork (or anything else). They rush through their assignments—when they remember to bring their books home. They turn work in late or not at all. In class, they keep quiet unless the teacher calls on them. Even then, they're likely to shrug their shoulders and go back to daydreaming or staring out the window.

What causes this apathetic behavior in children? What can parents and schools do to give these children the skills they need to motivate themselves?

Inside are some basic facts parents need to know about dealing with a disengaged student.

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Teach goal-setting.

One of the best ways to help your child become more engaged is by encouraging him to set—and achieve—goals. Help your child write down a specific goal. Then help him make a plan for achieving it.

You'll need to show your child how to break down a big task into several smaller ones. Make sure he checks these steps off as he achieves them—it's a great way to keep him motivated.

What should your child's reward be when he achieves a goal? See if he can develop a list of rewards he could give *himself*. Perhaps he could set aside some special time to work on a favorite hobby. Challenge him to come up with his own set of rewards.



What causes disengagement?

Parents often report that their child "just doesn't care." In fact, disengaged children may care *too much*. Ironically, one of the causes of apathy is that children don't want to do poorly. They'd rather say they didn't try than say they tried their hardest and came up short.

So children who feel that the emphasis is on grades rather than learning, on *being* the best rather than on *doing* one's best, tend to lose interest in learning for its own sake. Then when learning gets challenging, they disengage.

Other children have never had to develop a sense of responsibility for themselves. They've had everything done for them (including schoolwork). When the time comes for these children to stand on their own two feet, they won't have developed the mental "muscles" they need to be independent.



What can families do?

Listen to the messages you give your child.

Do you spend most of your time being critical? Tell your child often that he is loved unconditionally. Also, tell your child stories about people who succeeded as a result of their efforts.

Let your child take responsibility ... and accept consequences.

Every time you do something for your child that she could be doing for herself, you're sending the powerful message: "I don't really think you can do this." Pretty soon, your child comes to believe it, too. Make a conscious effort to give your child more responsibility. First-graders can and should make their beds. Sixth-graders can do the dishes. And children of *any* age should be responsible for completing their own school assignments.



Talk about *doing your best*, not *being the best*.

Emphasize *effort* with your child. Recognize her strengths and weaknesses. For a child who is a poor speller, setting a goal of a perfect score on every spelling test is probably not realistic. But every child can try to achieve a personal best.



Remind your child of past successes.

Sometimes, when children say, "I can't," they're really saying, "I don't know how." Remembering past accomplishments is the best way to convince your child that he really *can* achieve his goals. Success in one area often leads to confidence in others.



Show your support.

Remember to let your child know you're proud of her efforts. A smile, a hug, or a "good job!" can go a long way toward keeping your child motivated to do her best.

There's nothing wrong with an occasional material reward to recognize a job well done. But when rewards, not achievement, become the goal, it's time to change focus.



These tips won't turn a disengaged student into a highly motivated learner overnight. But they can start a child down the path that will lead to motivation ... and success.

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