

The Motivation Mystery

What if we could tap into a child's inner desire to learn?



How could a parent promote learning when their child appears disinterested and unengaged?

How could using coaching of self-efficacy, increase internal motivation to learn?

Exams are off, schools are 'closed' to the majority, and parents are expecting themselves to step into the shoes of educators with none or limited training. It should be emphasised to all, that parents need to let themselves off the hook and take away the expectations placed upon them to be a replacement teacher. Of course, this is easier said than done when sent work for completion. Although, we need to trust the school if they stress that 'work doesn't need to be done'. This is challenging, when indirectly, expectations are still present and our desire to do what is best takes over. Still, when we want our children to continue learning and not become stagnant at home, we seek to engage them in 'work' in order to learn.

Parents and teachers are coming up against resounding questioning from children who have become disillusioned by the processes of learning. Why learn when exams are gone, there is no benchmarking against peers and the world is a great big question mark? All valid questions. However, some of the maladaptive thinking around questioning the validity of learning may be symptomatic of becoming dependent on only seeing the value

in education based on outside expectations and compliance rather than from the intrinsic motivation seeking knowledge. If they believe that knowledge has value, they may freely engage in the pursuit of learning for their own benefit and not because we tell them to do so.

How do we become unstuck and move forward from the widely spread attitude of 'why does this learning apply to me'?

We need to get them to buy into the idea that learning and knowledge has currency and value. We need to support the shift from the external to internal motivation.

Curriculum Pressures

Children, parents and indeed teachers are also feeling this internalised pressure to drive learning forward in the systematic way presented in the National Curriculum. There is an underlying narrative that schools adhere to, based on statutory government guidance that places expectations on schools that effectively influence the way they plan and teach. Even the most idealistic teacher may find themselves having to acknowledge the external pressures that come with 'teaching to the test' mentality.



However, evidence-based research tells us that the best and richest learning comes from when learning is spontaneous and in the moment. When curiosity is cultivated and opportunities for wonder are presented. The early years ethos may have got it right with highlighting the importance of play and in the moment planning. Imagine if we were brave enough to apply these concepts across learning as a whole – all the way up through

the years beyond primary and into secondary classrooms – we may just finally access the key to internalised motivation for learning. Just because we get older in terms of chronological age and ‘grow up’, does not necessarily mean we need to consume specific knowledge or learn in a prescribed way. Therefore, the idea that at a given point in time we automatically learn differently, may be a fallacy. We all develop at different rates. And the idea of readiness for cognitive engagement might be a better placed concept than the current system of age and year group curriculum mapping of dictating what and how we should learn.



Why is there a shift in learning environment from Primary to Secondary?

There is a stark contrast between the colourful primary classroom, with resources freely accessible and designated areas for learning that inspire and encourage collaboration, compared with that of secondary, often with pupils seated in rows, with high levels of textbook use and minimal displays.

As children reach their teenage years, do we now think that the environment needs to be duller or information better transmitted and put into children’s brains through osmosis. Do we now view knowledge as effectively ready to be dropped into the mind, like building blocks ready to pick up later when directed?

The importance of the learning environment

It is more likely that the physical environment changes and therefore attitudes and actions

tend to follow the new schema or institutional norms it sits within. Learning can be invisible and much more visceral and almost magical than that described. Can we be creative enough with our methods to allow it to thrive?

Home Schooling

We have been granted this ‘beautiful’ and very challenging opportunity to now move to supporting learning remotely without certain constraints. The home environment has many pros and cons to accessing potential learning. If we could harness the knowledge of creating an environment in which learning is more likely to occur, we may be able to tap into the innate desire for motivation to learn.

This is hard!

To home school for parents is hard. To remote teach is hard. To navigate a world with a global pandemic is hard and to move an individual to care about their own learning journey is exceptionally hard. Psychological research shows that to change actions using compliance is a much easier task than to change a private belief.

So how do we accept the situation we have been thrown into and begin to find a new way of structuring our days and constructing our child’s learning journey. It seems as though we are in this for the foreseeable future, so we have time as adults to settle in and learn for ourselves.



Age and Development

Is it harder to engage a primary or secondary aged pupil in learning?

Those who are parents of teenagers would certainly give examples of how engagement becomes more difficult as children reach certain ages. Add to this the current situation and context and you have a perfect storm of the struggle. However, there are many a child in the younger age ranges who may have very differing needs and therefore changes the emphasis and provision to engage a learner.

Is 'Teach to the Test' cancelled?



We do not always have the privilege to decide on what children 'need' to be learning, as it is often set-in schools, who are dictated by some extent through the national curriculum. It could also be decided upon unconsciously during the planning process due to the 'teach to the test' necessity that has become prevalent in today's society.

Early Years and Primary school settings perhaps avoid this the best by focusing on topic work or learning through play approaches. This may be the time to flip things round and use skills-based and project methods to engage resistant learners across the older age groups.



Unfortunately, the narrative has been drummed into us across generations that in order for progression in career or to access full opportunities for work, we need to achieve 'good' grades that set a trajectory for our life course beyond school. Therefore, education tends to lean towards the syllabus as a direct guide to the content taught and leave the topic approach learning to the younger or Special Needs pupils.

What is the point of learning?

With the announcement of 'exam cancellation', children may begin to switch off as to the point of learning.

They have been conditioned to believe that learning's purpose is for the 'test'. So, when the test is removed, what does become the point of learning?

Now we get to show them the secret that we always knew as educators and parents. Learning isn't to achieve an abstract outcome decided by others, but for ourselves; to grow and develop knowledge to contribute what we can bring to the world and society we live in.

They can begin to see the value in intrinsic motivation for learning



Asking children to figure out what they want

What are their goals and ambitions? Can they put these thoughts into words and are they able to map out a pathway to achieving it?

If they do not know, then this endeavour is a most challenging task to undertake, especially

in uncertain times. Therefore, planning goals can sometimes feel a bit redundant.

However, there is significant value in engaging in this process. The changing external world around us doesn't stop the dreaming, the reaching and the drive for growth beyond our current situation. Once the doors are again open for opportunity, we need to be ready to seize our time to gain momentum and make progress in our lives. The belief that we have the tools and the ability to achieve a goal is the start of developing self-efficacy.

Is it possible to build self-efficacy and internal motivation for learning?

We need to help identify the stepping stones that can help them bridge the intention to action and reach their goal. If we can encourage these principles, this may be the key for them in getting across to the other side of the bridge that they have designed for themselves.



How do we begin to assess and increase the level of internal motivation for learning?

What is needed?

- Connection*
- Timing*
- A3 paper or laptop/tablet*
- Coloured pens/pencils*
- A coaching based discussion – setting a goal and the pathway*
- Carefully framed questions*
- Patience*
- Listening Skills*

- Awareness of Language*
- Role Modelling*

The Power of a Mind Map

Usually, 'let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start' as advocated by Maria Von Trapp – Sound of Music, would be great advice. Except in this case, where working backwards actually comes in much more use. If they know where they want to end up, then we can help them map the pathway and steps it takes to achieve the outcome they desire.

A Mind Map can be a very effective tool to get thoughts, ideas and plans onto paper and out of our heads in a visual and comprehensible way.



Coaching Self-Efficacy

Approaching internal motivation for learning can be exceptionally powerful when engaging in coaching type discussions. Unsurprisingly, it is very different when supporting an individual who is not your own child as the emotional trigger points and investment levels are lower. Therefore, it is much easier to be objective and neutral. Parents can learn from these techniques used in education settings, to stimulate thinking about engagement in the learning process. If this proves to be extremely challenging, they could also ask a supporting role model in the child's life to have these types of conversations - sometimes words from

someone who is not Mum or Dad, can be heard much louder.

Connection



The stronger your connection and the more authentic your relationship with your child, the safer they will feel in talking to you. Find moments for true connection and ask your child when it might be okay to have this conversation. Picking your time together would be ideal but that may not always be an option so perhaps choosing a moment where tension is low, they do not feel threatened and emotionally are feeling regulated. Best to ensure everyone has had food, water and sleep first!

Setting the goal

What do they desire?

The lovely and undoubtedly tricky thing for us parents, is we want the best for our children. However, we all have pre-conceived ideas of what that might be in our heads. Therefore, it is easy to slip into our own unconsciously bias view of what success might look like and how we envisage education and learning should be. If we try to impose these views, no matter how well intentioned, they may not be received kindly. We should try to avoid using our own language as a basis for the discussion. In fact, the smaller amount you talk, the better the quality of information you will receive. The key is asking questions, pausing and listening.

Posing Questions



How to pose a question?

Our goal is to facilitate thinking. So how we choose to phrase a question impacts on how the individual receives it and considers their position.

The tone, the choice of vocabulary and the syntax all makes a difference. How you frame the words and what you are actually trying to ask, needs to be thought through carefully before beginning to engage in these types of potentially sensitive topics.

If you stay curious and open, they may just follow your lead. You are the role model after all and even if they reject this ideal adamantly, they will still be looking to you for guidance on how to behave and respond.

Pause ... and wait



Wait longer than you would usually feel comfortable. Silence is power and a allowing quiet space creates opportunity for safe thinking and processing before a productive answer is formed. If we jump into this gap with well-meaning talk, ideas or prompts, we

are effectively denying them the time and thinking space to create their own thoughts. They may become more and more disengaged the more you speak. So, pause ... and wait.

Illustrating the importance of active listening, language ownership, feeling heard and validation

Active Listening



We all think we are listening. In fact, we are often coming up with something to say during the gaps and formulating when to best get our next answer in to the dialogue. Being active when we listen is a very tricky thing to do and requires training and practice, as our instinct may be to respond and reciprocate advice.

We may think we are listening but could actually be using someone's words to reinforce our internalised beliefs, or we could just not be listening at all. We could be off in our own minds, deciding what to eat for dinner, figuring out how to fit in work emails or planning how to achieve the tasks we need to get done that are being held in mind at the same time.

This is where being present, slowing down and carving out designated time would help with ensuring you can actively listen to the words being said to you. Hear the words, reflect upon them and summarise back. If you are actively listening, the speaker will feel heard and validated and a deeper connection and relationship is formed.

Language Ownership

If they tell you that they want to 'be rich' and have a 'mansion', try not to reword this into your language e.g., saying 'oh you want to have money and be successful enough to buy a house', and then proceed to tell them how you agree that having a secure job that earns money is important, maybe giving examples of what you believe.

By using the language voiced and by actively listening you are reinforcing the positive pattern that the best way to help them feel heard, is to reflect back and validate their own words and advocating their voice in the process. Write down their words on your mind map and give validity to their expression of language. You can of course support them to reframe it into a more realised full sentence, but this has to be done carefully once they feel listened to.

What is the pathway?



How can they articulate the ways in which to achieve their desired goal?

You can help them consider different possible pathways. If you are at the point of pondering career orientations, then websites such as <https://www.prospects.ac.uk> might be a good place to start - outlining different jobs, descriptions of day-to-day work and the accompanying salaries that might be expected.

Perhaps, the pathway that they think of is completely different to your imagined view and it surprises you. Consider how you may respond to their creative ideas and use as a springboard.



Keep in mind – This is in service of the ultimate outcome, a way to engage them into learning and increase internal motivation.

Check your 'self'

Ultimately, you need to evaluate your own self-efficacy - your belief to support your child in engaging with learning. The higher your confidence in engaging with your child in their learning journey, the greater the chance your child may follow your thinking and begin to internalise how knowledge could benefit them in their lives. Your ability to promote the value of learning organically in the culture of your home, known as 'cultural capital', increase the potential of better engagement in school learning and pursuit of knowledge for their own interest and benefit.



How do we get buy in?

In summary -

- **Validate your child's views and thoughts towards their goals and support them by using carefully framed questions to articulate what they want to achieve in their own words.**
- **Be patient and wait for responses before jumping in with your ideas and allow space for thoughts to**

develop into plans and eventually action.

- **Demonstrate your value of education and learning by going beyond telling and show your child how you engage in the learning process yourself.**

Your child may begin to imitate your ethos and move towards seeing the potential benefits for them to pursue knowledge.



If we can get them to move from magnifying external pressures for compliance towards encouragement of the pursuit of knowledge, we may just tap into unlocking their realisation of the value of intrinsic motivation for learning.

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