

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for Home

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INTRODUCTION

Student engagement refers to students' active involvement in, and commitment to, academic and social activities in their school (Li & Lerner, 2013). Student engagement is critical to learning, with research showing that it is related to a number of important outcomes. Among those outcomes are greater academic achievement, peer acceptance, emotional well-being, and fewer behavior problems and behaviors that pose health risks, such as smoking, alcohol and substance use, and sexual activity (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

When thinking about student engagement and the extent to which your child is engaged, it often helps to consider different types of engagement. The three types most recognized by researchers are emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. However, researchers often combine the last two types in the term cognitive-behavioral engagement because they are similar (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). *Emotional engagement* refers to students' thoughts and feelings toward school, including toward teachers and classmates, and their overall liking of school. When students are emotionally engaged, they like their teachers, classmates, and school. *Cognitive-behavioral engagement*, which combines the latter two types, refers to the desire and willingness to exert one's best effort toward learning, attend to academic tasks and complete assignments, follow rules, and be involved in nonacademic school activities. When students are cognitively and behaviorally engaged, they work hard; exhibit few, if any, behavior problems; and are likely to be involved in extracurricular activities (e.g., they participate in sports and clubs, or frequently attend related events).

Student engagement, especially cognitive-behavioral engagement, is closely related to motivation. The two differ, however, in that motivation is necessary but not sufficient for engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). For example, a student might be motivated to read, perform math, or play a sport but not actually engage in any of those activities, or might engage feebly. Some reasons students do not become engaged, despite their motivation, are their lack of skills, poor instruction, peer influences, and interfering emotions. Generally, however, when students are motivated, they also are engaged, and both motivation and engagement are influenced by similar factors. Although the term engagement, rather than motivation, is used throughout the handout, in most cases when engagement is used it refers to both engagement and motivation—the child is engaged and motivated to be engaged.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Student engagement is influenced by multiple factors. Primary among them are characteristics of the individual child and of the child's learning environment both at school and at home. Child characteristics include past academic achievement (a good predictor of future achievement); academic, social, and emotional skills; attitudes toward school and values held; future goals and aspirations; and the presence or absence of interfering behaviors and emotions. Primary among characteristics of the learning environment that influence student engagement are instructional methods and strategies used at school and home, the curriculum (i.e., what is expected and taught), teaching effectiveness, and parental support.

There are many other factors, both at home and at school, that influence students' engagement. Two major influencing factors are (a) important others in the student's life, especially parents, siblings, friends, and peers; and (b) the style of parenting, or child-rearing, used at home. With respect to the influence of others, good role models of engagement foster school engagement. With respect to parenting (and also classroom management), research indicates that an authoritative approach works best for fostering engagement. It is important not to confuse the authoritative approach with the authoritarian approach—the latter is much more demanding and structured, and often too harsh. In contrast, the authoritative approach consists of a balanced combination of responsiveness (also called social support) and demandingness (or structure). This approach is seen in the first recommendation that follows. Responsiveness refers to caring, warmth, respect, and responsiveness to your child's psychological needs. Demandingness refers to having high, yet realistic, academic and behavioral expectations, and closely supervising and monitoring your child's behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS¹

1. **Demonstrate an authoritative approach to parenting by being both responsive and demanding.** The authoritative approach consists of a healthy balance of responsiveness and demandingness. In demonstrating responsiveness, you convey warmth, caring, and respect as you respond to your child's emotional, social, and academic needs. Responsiveness is critical to helping your child feel accepted, connected with others, competent, and self-confident. An example of demonstrating responsiveness is talking about your child's day at dinner each evening, and providing resources, support, and guidance when needed, such as when peer problems exist or schoolwork is too difficult or stressful. Demonstrate demandingness by establishing clear behavioral and academic expectations and routines (such as completing homework),

having fair rules and consequences, and closely monitoring engagement-related behavior.

2. **Use praise and rewards wisely and strategically.** Be sure to praise and reward your child for good behavior, but especially for behavior related to student engagement, such as completing assignments, receiving good grades, and expressing and demonstrating an interest in school activities. This approach not only helps to demonstrate that you are responsive to your child's needs, but also often calls attention to the behaviors you desire and increases their occurrence. Using rewards wisely and strategically also means that you are not harming your child's intrinsic motivation. See *Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home* for specific strategies.
3. **Closely monitor and assist with homework assignments, as appropriate.** Specific recommendations for helping your child with homework completion are presented in *Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home*. Provide a set time and appropriate place for completing homework, have clear expectations, and check to make sure all assignments are completed and on time.
4. **Communicate the benefits of education and the importance of being engaged in school.** This should be done in multiple ways, such as by talking about the value of education during family discussions, and by highlighting examples or models of school engagement in the community or in media.
5. **Build from your child's interests, values, and goals, and offer choices that match them.** Parents generally know what interests their children most and what they value. Often, they also know what their children's goals are in life, especially as children become older. Parents also know that children are more motivated and engaged when the subject matter or activity is of great interest to them. When your child has options to choose from, guide your child to choose materials and activities that match those interests, values, and goals. For example, allow your child to choose books on topics that interest him or her, while making sure that the materials and activities also match your child's abilities.

Of course, choices do not always exist, such as when children who dislike math have to learn math skills. In such cases, try to point out the value

1 Recommendations are adapted from a training module developed by the authors, titled *Improving Student Engagement*, funded by a School Climate Transformation grant awarded to the Delaware Department of Education by the United States Department of Education.

of learning the new skill—even if the skill does not relate directly to the child's interests and future goals. For example, you could emphasize that working hard on tasks that are of little personal interest helps to develop patience, demonstrates a work ethic to others, and helps achieve the more immediate goal of receiving good grades.

6. **Provide variety, novelty, and fun in instructional methods and learning activities.** Motivation and engagement often wane when the same methods and activities for learning are repeated over and over, whether over days or within the same day. Variety and novelty generally increase interest and engagement and make learning fun. Where appropriate, try to make learning fun by playing educational games or including gamelike and fun features in learning activities, such as novelty, surprise, fantasy, and humor.
7. **Challenge your child to set short-term and long-term goals and to develop plans for achieving them.** These goals should be realistic and geared toward both academics and behavior. For long-term goals, especially for a student in higher grades, challenge the student to reflect upon his or her possible self in the future. Ask questions such as: “What does it mean to be a successful student and adult?” “What must you do to achieve your goals?” Provide activities to help your child develop strategies for attaining short- and long-term goals. Activities might focus on the importance of completing homework, managing time, volunteering for community service, and working with others. Help your child to set standards and methods for monitoring progress toward achieving those goals. For example, if your child's short-term goal is to complete all homework assignments for the marking period, suggest monitoring progress by recording daily homework completion on a chart. For long-term goals, your child can reflect on and discuss or write down what activities have helped to meet the goals each week.
8. **Emphasize mastery goals and mastery in external and self-evaluations.** The importance of grades should be recognized, but be sure to emphasize that mastering the material is even more important than the grade received. Encourage your child to focus on personal progress toward learning new skills rather than comparing those skills with those of others, and to focus on the information contained in grades rather than on the grades themselves.
9. **Emphasize effort and persistence more than ability.** Thinking this way leads to the adoption of what is called a *growth mind-set* rather than a *fixed ability mind-set*. With a growth mind-set, students understand that with effort and persistence one can become smarter, and that intelligence is not fixed.
10. **Encourage frequent self-evaluation.** Encourage your child to stop often and think about the progress he or she has made. This activity includes self-evaluation not only of progress toward short- and long-term goals, but also of performance on daily tasks and assignments. Encourage your child to focus on specific performance feedback, both positive and constructive, rather than on a grade alone. Your child should be asking, “What did I learn and how can I do better?” and not just “What grade did I get?” In sum, encourage your child to identify and learn from mistakes, reflect on achieving goals, and gauge the mastery of the material taught.
11. **Encourage self-comparisons rather than social comparisons.** Comparing oneself to others, especially when others are, or appear to be, doing much better, is likely to stifle motivation and engagement. It is often more motivating to compare one's performance to one's past performance. Thus, encourage your child to focus on personal progress toward learning new knowledge and skills rather than on how he or she compares with others. Challenge your child to think about “How much have I improved?” rather than “How am I doing compared with everyone else?”
12. **Encourage your child to participate in extracurricular activities.** Those activities would include sports, clubs, and school governance. Also, encourage your child to become an active member of the school community by attending extracurricular events. Allow your child to choose among activities and events, as this fosters commitment and engagement.
13. **Provide and highlight models of engagement.** Learning about or observing others who are motivated and engaged can spark children to exhibit the same behaviors, such as persistence, hard work, and the desire to achieve one's goals. What your child gains largely depends on the characteristics of the model observed. Your child is more inclined to copy the behavior of role models if they have the following:

- Interpersonal qualities that your child and others appreciate or admire, such as friendliness, caring, and a sense of humor.
- Skills or competencies that your child and others would like to possess, such as academic, athletic, musical, or artistic skills; financial success; and popularity.
- Similarities to your child, such as similar age, gender, and race.

Be sure not only to highlight those models, and especially the specific qualities and skills you hope your child will copy, but also to reinforce those qualities and skills when your child exhibits them. Also, be sure to provide not only good models of engagement-related behaviors but also models of ways of thinking that support those behaviors. For example, you might say aloud, “I can do it if I keep trying,” and “I might not be perfect at this, but I’m getting better.” Finally, don’t forget that you and others in your family are perhaps the most important role models. If you are actively engaged in reading, sports, clubs, and so on, your children are more likely to be engaged in school.

14. **Take care of yourself.** Just as it is important that you and family members model engagement-related behaviors, such as persistence and hard work, it also is important that they model good mental health. It is extremely difficult for a child to be motivated and engaged when a parent or significant other in the family is clinically depressed, abusing alcohol or drugs, or otherwise experiencing issues of mental health, especially if family members are not receiving treatment.
15. **If your child is disengaged from school, or poorly motivated, work with the school.** Your child’s teachers and others in the school can help provide more intensive interventions and supports. Those interventions and supports might include the following, guided by an individual assessment of your child’s needs, if needed (conducted by a team of mental health and educational specialists):
- *Increased home–school communication and collaboration.* The school and home should work closely together in monitoring and promoting your child’s engagement, such as by holding a teacher–student–parent conference, using a daily or weekly report card or behavioral contract, and using electronic postings of assignments and work completed.

- *Counseling or social skills training.* Either individual or group counseling and training can be used to address your child’s needs and build on strengths.
- *Tutoring.* Tutoring can take place either during school or after school to teach your child skills that may be lacking.
- *Individual mentoring and guidance.* The program Check and Connect has the strongest evidence base for fostering engagement among likely dropouts. A school staff member serves as a mentor, meeting at least weekly with the student and coordinating communication with the student’s family. The program is successful because the mentor builds and maintains a positive and supportive relationship with the student; works with the student to monitor signs of disengagement, such as attendance, grades, and behavioral referrals; and addresses areas of need, such as tutoring, study skills training, social skills training, or counseling. Your school might offer this program or one like it.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<http://www.scholastic.com/parents/resources/article/motivate-school-success/10-ways-to-motivate-your-child-to-learn>

This list of recommendations for motivating children is found on Scholastic’s website for parents. Additional recommendations for helping parents educate their children can be found at the website.

<https://www.educationcorner.com/motivating-your-child-to-learn.html>

Although this website, Education Corner: Education that Matters, is primarily for teachers, it also offers practical recommendations to parents for educating their children. Included is this list of recommendations to parents for motivating children.

Books and Articles

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2009). *Smart but scattered*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Guare, R., Dawson, P., & Guare, C. (2012). *Smart but scattered teens*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

These two books provide parents with strategies to help foster engagement in their children and teens, especially those lacking important

executive skills such as being organized and staying focused. Strategies and activities included are learning to identify your child's strengths and weaknesses, boosting specific skills, and solving problems with daily routines.

Related Helping Handouts

- Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home
- Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior and Developing Self-Discipline: Helping Handout for Home
- School Completion: Helping Handout for School and Home
- Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home
- Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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