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HOME / FAMILY: SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE AT HOME.

Get Off Facebook and Do Something! How to motivate an inert child.

By Alan E. Kazdin and Carlo Rotella Posted Monday, May 31, 2010, at 7:00 AM ET

We've written often for *Slate* about specific behaviors that parents want to develop or discourage in their children, but there is more to family life than a set of particular behaviors. Many of the deepest concerns of parents are more general. One of the most common is the worry that their children, especially preadolescents and adolescents, are just not motivated to do anything. The child may sit lumpishly around his room, watch TV, play video games, or fool around at the computer while screened off from the world by permanently implanted ear buds. He doesn't really show much interest in anything or talk to anyone, and texting or Facebooking his life away seems like a pallid substitute. Understandably, parents worry that a child who seems inert now may be on a trajectory to become a full-time slacker in perpetuity.

What can a parent do? How do you get an apparently unmotivated child to try anything, especially when that means pushing uphill against the slope of our culture's technology-assisted passivity?

A parent confronted with this situation will have discovered that sometimes you can't even lead a horse to water, let alone make her drink. If you nag or reprimand your child, or deliver one [of the standard parental rants on the subject of motivation](#), you almost guarantee that she won't go anywhere near the water.

But that doesn't mean you're helpless.

Before we get to nuts and bolts, let's take a moment to rethink the common view of motivation. Old-fashioned psychology tended to place the cause of actions within the individual, labeling her with deep-seated traits: She is lazy, honest, reckless, and so on. People do vary considerably in such characteristics, so this older view has not been replaced so much as refined. We now know much more about how contextual features—factors in the environment, age- and development-related influences—shape such characteristics. For example, researchers have demonstrated how a person's level of honesty can be influenced by what others around her are doing, whether she believes some dishonesty will be detected, whether she just experienced a fair and equitable interaction, and so on.

Think of motivation, then, not as an inherent trait, not as an engine within the child that generates behavior, but rather as a result of an interaction between environment and an individual's temperament (biological characteristics evident at birth) and personality (some people seek novelty more than others; some people are a lot more social or introspective). In any given case, we do not know exactly what causes one child to approach life like a sloth and another like a roadrunner, but it's useful to understand motivation as *following*, not just preceding, behavior. That gives you some options for your own behavior as a parent, since the research shows that 1) inactivity and other aspects of one's style of approaching life are not fixed and immutable, and 2) home situation and others' actions can have a strong influence on a child's motivation.

Identifying the Problem

First, you need to consider exactly what you're seeing that looks to you like a lack of motivation. Lack of interest or just sitting around doing nothing is the behavioral equivalent of a headache. All by itself, a headache is a fairly nonspecific symptom. It can be something mild and passing, related to an extraneous condition like too much pollen, or a signal of something worse, like a brain tumor. The interpretation of the headache depends on many other factors; so does understanding your child's lack of interest. Here are some factors to consider:

Normal down time. Some down time is not just normal but essential. The lives of many children are highly programmed, leaving no space for a trip to the dentist, let alone an hour of dreamy idleness. So it's good if a child has down time and if you both have hang-out-with-nothing-to-be-accomplished time. Don't let the impulse toward a highly scheduled life demonize periods of seemingly unconstructive, unproductive behavior. Allow for them, and even try to program them into your family's schedule. If you and your child can share the same down time together, all the better. Tell stories, play cards, shoot the breeze, contemplate the heavens.

Also, in preadolescence and adolescence, a child is likely to show reduced interest in activities around the house. So much of a child's life at this stage is focused on peers who share the same music, clothes, jokes, and temporary disdain of adults that stage-related lack of motivation around the house is likely and normal. As adolescence approaches, ideally, you will have established some family rituals and routines—such as eating meals together when possible, time together in the course of shared chores, outings to concerts or games, volunteering, fishing or protesting against those who fish, whatever floats your boat. These are more easily continued if started early in childhood rather than starting fresh in adolescence, but even a late start is better than nothing at all, since these routines keep a child engaged with family life.

Possible concern. One situation that should cause concern is when a child who has been active, social, and routinely interested in things becomes mopey, sits around doing almost nothing, and expresses little interest in doing anything. These changes in behavior (like the headache) can occur for many reasons, of course, and they often show up with the coming of adolescence, but they can also be signs of depression. Other signs are negative comments about oneself (*I can't do anything right*) or the world (*nothing is really that much fun anymore*) and comments that reflect hopelessness about the future (*this will just turn out bad like everything else does*). The child may be more irritable and sensitive than usual, and you might also see changes in eating and sleeping. Even seemingly jokey comments along the lines of "I wish I was dead" should be taken seriously if they come up as part of this larger pattern, especially if they're repeated. If in doubt, see a mental health professional.

It's also possible that your child cannot concentrate or focus, and that's what you may be seeing when you say he or she seems unmotivated. Here the problem is not necessarily disinterest or sadness but limits in sustained attention: The child can't stay with a task for more than a few minutes, shifts to a new one, then becomes distracted from that one. This can happen at home, at school, or both. Everyone has occasional problems in focusing, so here we are looking for whether it recurs in a pattern. It may look like boredom to you—and to your child—but the problem may have more to do with ability to focus or concentrate. Parents and school officials are often quick to jump to a diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, but ADHD is not the only cause of such a recurring inability. If the lack of focus is interfering with performance at home or at school, if the child is having trouble meeting reasonable expectations, it would be worth seeing a mental health professional.

Stress. Apparent lack of motivation can also be a reaction to stress. Adults have a natural tendency to dismiss the notion that children can be stressed. After all, it's just childhood, with no threat of losing one's job or failing to make mortgage payments.

Your child's portfolio of life activities is probably more restricted than yours, and that can actually increase the stress on him. Kids have school all day and a relatively fixed set of peers, so if something goes wrong with one of their emotional stocks, their emotional stock market can be quick to collapse. Children's reaction to stress may look like depression, and it often occurs in reaction to a specific event related to peers, like an important relationship breaking off. Even without the specter of divorce, litigation, or prenuptial agreements, a break in a friendship or romance can be momentarily traumatic.

Add to that a little peer ridicule for the usual things—being overweight, for instance, or being in the low reading group—and a seemingly minor event can turn into a significant problem.

Specific or general lack of motivation? Lack of motivation and seeming laziness can be specific to an area of the child's life, rather than across the board.

Children who are bullied at school, for instance, may be very slow to get ready for school and express disinterest in it. Foot-dragging and a seeming inability to get their acts together to go to school are obvious and irksome to parents, but take them as an invitation to consider whether the child is generally unmotivated or more specifically shying away from school because something bad is going on there.

Another common school-related example: Children who are having trouble with academics, in general or in specific domains (reading is a typical one), may look like they are not trying. In fact, they may no longer be trying. They don't want to read; they don't want to do homework; and, when forced to, they dawdle, do not get it done, or do it poorly. If young, they may cry and have tantrums. Your natural view might be that insufficient motivation is the cause of their problem when in fact it is the *result*. Small deficiencies or deficits in specific skills could be the problem. In the U.S., approximately 15 percent of the population has some type of learning disability. Consequently, when there's a school-related lack of motivation, it's worth looking into the possibility of problems in one of the core academic areas. Much can be done to address such problems, but first they have to be identified so that remedial programs can be started.

OK, we've gone over the process of identifying the problem. ([Here's a summary of guiding questions.](#)) Now, let's consider what to do about it.

Doing Something

Telling your child over and over to stop sitting around and do something probably hasn't worked very well, but that doesn't mean a parent's behavior can't make a difference. The quality of home life you help to orchestrate can play an important role in prying your child away from her bed, computer, or cell phone.

To begin with, if your child spends a lot of time staring dully at screens, then you're going to have to be firm—gentle, but firm—about limiting that time. If he's texting at the dinner table, tuned out on an iPod during family outings, or on Facebook all evening, the massive inertia of all that electronic passivity may foil even the most inspired efforts on your part to cultivate interests and motivation. So, before you start setting goals and modeling the behaviors you want and all that, you need to be prepared to draw the line on technology-assisted distraction. And yes, of course, if your child is meeting regularly with fellow geniuses to build computers from spare parts while speaking a special binary language they invented in their spare time, that's different. That's an interest, not a distraction from interest. OK, onward.

Setting goals. You want your child to be motivated, but motivated to do *what*? "Anything but sit in front of the TV" is not a good enough answer. You need a short, manageable list of interests that you can encourage your child to pursue as part of regular family life.

The challenge for a parent is to lead the child to some interests and follow the child to others. It would be nice if there were such a thing as "sampler lessons" that gave a taste of dance, sports, musical instruments, science, gardening, and so on. The purpose would be merely to identify some areas to which the child seems to respond and that could be pursued further. But the concept is worth noting, and life does offer its own more informal sampler lessons. Your child does offer some clues as to what kinds of interests are more likely to take. Does she have a feeling for animals? Is he into martial arts movies? Why? Find out more, and look for the kernel of potential interest. She might end up, say, volunteering at an animal shelter or learning to ride horses; it might turn out that he'd be interested in knowing more about kung fu or how to make a movie or cooking Cantonese food.

Expectations. Establish early in life some reasonable, not-too-heavy expectations that the child, as a member of the family, will participate in the life and running of the household. Simple chores and

duties begun at an early age, even if not really helpful at first, are very useful in this regard. They establish your expectations in deed rather than in the form of an abstract sermon.

There is a continuum that runs from no expectations at all ("Let 'em be kids; this is the only time in their lives they'll be able to do nothing") to prebirth planning for an 18-year campaign culminating in Ivy League admission. You can develop motivation as a habit in the middle ground, where daily life is shaped. As part of the routine of life, your expectation that your child will fulfill responsibilities that increase with age conveys the point that activity and participation are natural. Such expectations can be a powerful force to counteract any developing tendency toward lack of interest or passive moping.

Modeling. Parents tend to focus heavily on teaching the lessons of life by talking. They tend to pay less attention to their own ability to influence their children through modeling. Observational learning is more potent than you might think. In terms of psychological influences, modeling is equivalent to the forehand in tennis, your steadiest and most reliable tool. Thus, no matter how much you tell your child that you want him to have interests and do things, your own behavior in that regard is more important.

Modeling can be used strategically to develop character, interests, and motivation. For instance, if you have some regular activity outside the house that's not necessarily adults-only, get in the habit of bringing your child along. Museums, particular social or political causes, sports or exercise, volunteering—it doesn't matter that much what it is.

What matters is your going and enjoying the activity. Taking your child along and making a routine out of it can have enormous benefits in terms of motivating your child and also in building your relationship. The routine and relationship-building aspects might be accomplished by doing regular chores like grocery shopping together, but we're talking about an added goal of being together: to engage in activities that build interest and competencies, accumulated knowledge or skill, over time. The growth of knowledge and skill mutually nurture interest and the desire to get out of the home and into activities. We mention this under the heading of modeling because having the child tag along to witness your direct involvement can be extremely valuable.

Building competencies. Building competencies does not always require that you model or engage in the activities yourself. It is useful to help your child develop some skill, activity, or talent that can continue over many years and pay dividends in social engagement. Music lessons, for instance, not only build skill in an instrument, they also bring the musician into contact with others (jamming, recitals, school orchestras), which can do a great deal to build motivation. Although interests can be used to build competencies, this is a two-way street. Building competencies can build interest, which in turn leads to more motivation and activity.

Environmental cues. How can one encourage an unmotivated child to take an interest in anything? Slowly, in a low-key fashion, and with mini- and many opportunities.

A body of research has elaborated and refined the effect of environmental cues on behavior. We're not aware of many of the things that influence our decisions, interests, and actions. Our minds are processing information all of the time, often below the level of awareness. We can see the brain lighting up in brain imagery scans, but when the researchers ask the subject what just happened, he will say, "Nothing." We also know that if we present some cue too quickly for a person to notice, it can still influence what she does, or a decision she makes, even though she could not tell you what the cue was. For example, a faint smell of cleaning liquids makes people straighten up their desks a little bit more than usual. When asked why they did it, they do not report on the smell, or they give a really good reason that has nothing to do with the smell.

In terms of motivating a child, it's useful to leave some novel and engaging things around the house where your child can come upon them in the course of daily life: books, a magazine or two, or a keyboard plugged in and ready to play. They should be things that don't require a lot of effort to fool around with (as opposed to, say, clay or paints) and can be casually picked up for a low-stakes initial look. Such casual opportunities to take an interest can exert a significant effect, but it's important to let your child connect with these engaging things on her own. Think of her just taking a brief peek at a magazine, a light connection. If you burst into the room at that point and exclaim, "Did you see the pictures of Wyoming? Weren't they gorgeous? I've booked tickets for us to go there this weekend,"

you're very likely to kill the budding interest. Instead, let the child find her own way to engagement; use the power of modeling to show her how: Sit down at the keyboard yourself from time to time, tinker and play a bit, give your child a behavior to imitate. (And, as we said before, you'll also have to draw the line on TV, video games, and other such distractions.)

Peers. Making your child's peers welcome in your house is good policy. For many children and families, the home is a place to sleep and to grab meals and not much more. But having the home open to peers makes it more central to family life and gives it a chance to exert a stronger continuing influence on a child. Also, as a child reaches adolescence, it's normal for him to draw a line separating you from his peers and whatever they approve of. Bringing more of your child's world into your home is a way to undraw that line and to monitor and protect him without babying him. It lowers his chances of going off course as [peer influences pull at him](#) and [foster risky behavior](#).

Also, when you're choosing an outside-the-house activity, let the child select a friend to go with you. This might be one of the regular activities we mentioned under the heading of modeling—a concert, a movie, or some competence-building activity during which interest, knowledge, and skill can accumulate. Take your child, let her invite a friend, and let them both see that you enjoy the activity yourself. Have a little lunch or snack; make an excursion of it. As your child grows toward adolescence and her peers become more important to her, you can recognize and integrate that. At some point, the need for you to model an interest will fade away as the kids develop their own strong preferences and start picking the concerts—and you may have to suffer through some teenybopper extravaganzas that you'll have to chalk up to parental sacrifice. But the larger principle remains the same. By making a routine of accepting and integrating peers in family activities, you've taken steps to keep your child close to you and build your relationship while also letting her choose to be with her friends, and you've done it in a way that doesn't set up a conflict between the attraction of peers and your desire to cultivate your child's interests and motivation.

[Here's a list of further resources](#) on children and motivation.

Resources for Parents

[Motivating Students Who Don't Care: Successful Techniques for Educators](#) by Allen Mendler.

[Motivated Minds: Raising Children To Love Learning](#) by Deborah Stipek and Kathy Seal.

[Values—Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence](#) from the U.S. Department of Education.

[Motivating Learning in Young Children](#) from the National Association of School Psychologists.

Alan E. Kazdin, who was president of the American Psychological Association in 2008, is John M. Musser professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University and director of Yale's Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic. Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College.