



Resilience Counseling & Training Center

*Providing counseling, training and
consulting services around the world.*



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Motivating Children to Learn: What works & what doesn't

A frequent question we receive from both parents and teachers is that of, *"My child/student is completely unmotivated; how can I motivate him/her to work harder in school?"* Let's begin by understanding that this question begins with a totally false assumption. It is impossible for a child to be "unmotivated or lack motivation". All living beings are motivated! The question is not, is he/she motivated; but rather, toward what goal is this child motivated to attain?

Every parent or teacher wants to instill the motivation to work hard, achieve, excel and grow/improve in children. Unfortunately, while well-intentioned, they often employ mistaken strategies that only serve to unwittingly undermine this very goal.. Children instead become "motivated" to avoid failure by not trying, to resist adult pressure by acting

'as if' they are disinterested, or to seek some other self-protective, but self-destructive, goal. One of our primary axioms for working effectively with children is, *"Never fight with someone who can defeat you by simply doing nothing; he/she is an invincible opponent!"* Many supposedly 'unmotivated' children are in actuality motivated to resist adult's demands and/or to avoid failure and defeat in school by simply 'doing nothing; not trying"! Even high achieving students often put less than their best effort forward to protect themselves from perceived failure by falling short or not being the best. The "if only you tried harder" comment by adults provides them with protection from not being 'the best' while maintaining the reputation of having the ability to be so.

What doesn't Work?

So, what strategies are frequently used by parents and teachers that actually undermine children's motivation to learn? Three strategies are most common: criticism/nagging, praising, and rewarding.

Criticism/Nagging: Many adults will resort to constant criticism of a child pointing out how they should work harder, try harder, study more. Parents and teachers can all too easily fall into the trap of being mistake focused and constantly commenting upon what the child did wrong, should have done differently/better, or should have worked/studied harder. Ask yourself, "When my spouse or friends constantly point out my flaws & mistakes does it build motivation or resentment"? If you are like most of us, it is the latter! Sometimes, we even manage to undermine encouraging comments by using the words "but" or "and next time" after something positive. For example, "you got all B's on your report card and next time let's see if you can make all A's"! The message to the child is, "Your performance is still not good enough to meet my standards, you failed!" Recall how you'd feel if someone said, "I like the way you've redecorated your kitchen, but next time I'd suggest a different color for the walls!" Which half of that sentence sticks?

Praising: Many adults believe that praising a child is motivating. The research says quite the opposite. Praise involves the evaluation of another and labels them in some way, "you are so smart, talented, the best, such a good reader, and so forth". What a child hears is, 'as long as I do well, I am accepted and valued; but if I fail, do less well, I therefore am unacceptable, of no value!" This results in what psychologist, Carol Dweck, has termed a "Fixed Mindset". That is, "I am or am not _____, and this will never change.". Research studies have demonstrated how praise fosters a "fixed

mindset" and undermines motivation. Children learn to not try new things, creative things, or to take on new challenges out of fear of failure and thus diminishing their value, status or worth in the eyes of others. In other words, when you reach the peak of a mountain, the next step can only be downhill so best to stop, freeze and go/try no further!

Rewarding: Offering rewards or tangible incentives for performance is one of the most common mistaken methods employed to motivate children to learn. Charts, stickers and tokens or even money are employed to reward children for their accomplishments. This mistaken practice is so culturally ingrained that it is now accepted and practiced almost without question. But again, the research tells us something very different. Offering tangible or extrinsic rewards for learning, in the long term, has been shown to actually DE-motivate learning. The researchers Deci, Koestner, & Ryan for example, reviewed 128 studies over several decades on the effects of rewards and concluded that the evidence clearly indicates that tangible, extrinsic rewards have a negative impact on children's intrinsic motivation, or desire, to learn. While there is often a short-term positive impact of such rewards, in the long run they de-motivate. Tangible rewards only work to motivate people to do tasks that are otherwise unappealing. When rewards are paired with tasks such as learning, that are intrinsically motivating by nature, they backfire! The hidden message is unwittingly sent that either a) there is nothing appealing about learning and only a fool would do this for nothing, or b) learning is not fun or interesting but adults are willing to purchase good grades (so re-negotiate your 'contract' annually). Rewards are what adults are willing to pay for grades and work completion but not what kids most need which is a sense of self-efficacy and the freedom to try and to learn, without risk of failure or criticism.

What does Work?

Ok, so if these strategies don't work and tend instead to de-motivate, then what does work? What can a parent or teacher do to 'win kids over' to learning, trying, and achieving rather than getting stuck in the trap of trying to "make them learn"? Here are just a few proven strategies to win kids over to learning that might help you get started on the right track.

Growth Mindset/Encouraging Feedback: Keep your focus and feedback on the positive emphasizing growth and movement in the right direction! Successful people, and successful businesses and organizations have a 'Growth Mindset'. This means they view themselves not as 'great, smart, the best' etc. but rather that I'm doing OK, and will

strive to do even better tomorrow. Adults can instill this kind of Growth Mindset in children by using the language of encouragement which focuses upon

- **Progress**, " you're getting better every day",
- **Effort**, "that was a tough one, but you really worked hard on it!", and
- **Improvement**, "Wow, look at how much you've improved in reading, Congratulations!"

This involves firmly believing in the child's ability to eventually succeed! Avoid the temptation to rush to attaching a negative label to his/her sense of identity (e.g., diagnosing as possessing some vague disorder or disability or calling a child lazy, slow, stubborn, etc.. Kids will live up to, or down to, the labels we assign to them (aka: a Fixed Mindset of "I am _____ and that's what I'll always be; so why try?"

Aligning with & Connecting: When we align 'against' someone's actions or behaviors, we invite them into a power struggle, to see who will overpower and win out over whom. Kids will always win this power struggle! They merely have to 'do nothing' to win. Instead, connect with the child and learn about and focus on his/her interests. Engage in learning activities (reading to, going to events/experiences, etc.) that are of interest to the child. When one is aligned "with us" we tend to cooperate and seek to maintain this positive connection, not to fight against it.

Model the behavior you wish to see: Staying encouraged and optimistic oneself as parent or teacher is also important! Model the motivation to learn by being a lifelong learner and actively engaging in learning new things yourself. Also, be willing to share your frustrations and mistakes in learning new skills with your child but model perseverance and optimism! This can go a long way in creating a positive, supportive learning atmosphere for children. How do you handle setbacks, frustrations, mistakes? How often do you seek to learn new things? Are you open or closed to new experiences? Having your children view your willingness to learn, to try, to explore new hobbies, and to handle setbacks with honesty and a positive, optimistic attitude can model good learning in both families and classrooms.

Look for next month's ***RCTC Newsletter*** when we'll explore further the topic of motivating children and developing capable and resilient kids further.

Interested in learning more?

Contact our RCTC office regarding parent education and parent coaching services, speaking services for groups and organizations, or professional development programs for schools.

Tel: (603) 730-5467 or **Email:** resiliencectc@aol.com

Key to Calm:



A children's fairytale that teaches children and parents to self calm, develop a more positive family environment, and to foster emotional intelligence (EQ). By Dr. Monica Nicoll.

Order via Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or the [RCTC website](#).

October 19, 2015:

Dr. Monica Nicoll will have a reading of her book, "**Key to Calm**", at the **Conway Library** for all parents and children starting at **6:30pm**. The reading will present a children's fairy tale that teaches children self-calming, quieting skills while providing parents with skills for calm parenting and creating a calm, nurturing home and family.

October 20-22, 2015: Dr. Bill Nicoll will be providing 3-day training and consultation services for the teachers, school counselors and parents of the International School Nido de Aguilas in **Santiago, Chile**. Topics will focus upon

Developing Positive Classrooms and Resilient Kids.

October 24, 2015:

The Positive Discipline Association's East Coast Conference

will be held in Stamford, Connecticut. Dr. Bill Nicoll will be one of the invited speakers at the conference speaking on:

Raising Resilient Youth via Home-School Collaboration.

For further information on this conference: Go to

www.positivediscipline.org.

November 2015: RCTC will begin a monthly evening seminar series (free, open to public) at the Eastern Slope Inn in North Conway.

Date/Time: TBA

Topic Week 1: "Helping Children Succeed: What parents and

teachers need to know".



RCTC appointed as USA Country Coordinator for

ENSEC: Bill & Monica Nicoll at the Resilience Counseling & Training Center in North Conway, NH were appointed USA Country Coordinators for the European Network for Social Emotional Competence (ENSEC) at their bi-annual conference in Lisbon, Portugal this summer. This European based organization now consists of educators and researchers from around the world interested in developing resilience, social-emotional competence, and positive social-emotional adjustment in children and adolescents. Contact [RCTC](#) if you, your school, or your organization is interested in learning more about SEL programs and research.

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