



Lighting the Fire of Motivation in Your Teen

By Bobbi DePorter

One of the most difficult tasks parents face in bringing up teenagers is motivating them to do their best, particularly in the academic arena. The truth is it's very hard for parents to motivate their kids.

Motivation is intrinsic; it comes from within. Parents, or teachers for that matter, can't force a young person to get motivated to learn more at school. The more they try the more resistance they receive.

Of course there's the proverbial carrot on the stick approach. "If you get better grades, you can earn a _____." Incentives, or bribes, only go so far for so long.

So what does motivate a student?

In working with teens for nearly 30 years, I have found that young people who are confident in themselves are more likely to be motivated to move out of their comfort zone, set goals and go after achieving those goals with a single-minded focus.

So maybe the better question for parents is, "How do I build confidence in my teen?"

Two of the five tenets that permeate every aspect of my company's youth training speak to the confidence issue. The first tenet is "Acknowledge Every Effort." We know that learning involves taking risks and a willingness to step out of what is comfortable. Acknowledging your kids for both their competence and their effort builds confidence over time.

The next tenet that applies to building a student's confidence is "If It's Worth Learning, It's Worth Celebrating." Celebration is the breakfast of champion learners. Celebration provides feedback regarding progress and increases positive emotional associations with the learning.

I like to refer to "mini-success moments." In other words, while major successes, such as a 4.0 on a report card, are worth celebrating, so are smaller things like completing a project that required some extra effort, voluntarily going in for an early morning or evening tutoring session in math, and so on.

These simple events are successes that, when acknowledged and "celebrated," help make a young person feel good about him or herself, a little more confident, and willing to do even more to be successful when the next opportunity arises.

The Power of WIIFM

Another motivational strategy parents can employ with their kids, especially teens, is to frame tasks and responsibilities in the context of what the end benefit is for them. I call this strategy WIIFM ("What's in it for me?").

Teens and pre-teens are so into instant gratification that it's hard for them to see the big picture. So when a parent can calmly, without lecturing, open a young person's eyes to the longer-term benefit of accomplishing an assignment or getting a good grade, then there's a much better chance that the intrinsic motivation will kick in.



When a teen can combine an understanding of WIIFM with a sense of passion about achieving a goal, obstacles will start to fall away. At our teen summer camps, we stage an event near the end of the 10-day session that helps campers identify an important life goal and mentally break through their biggest barrier to achieving the goal.

We pass around 12-by-12-inch pine boards and markers. We tell campers that this activity is not about breaking a piece of wood. It's a metaphor about life. It's about how you can get what you want in your life. It's about breaking barriers to grab on to your goals. Today is about going for it no matter what.

They have the power to break through any barrier. It has nothing to do with body size or physical condition. The skinniest, smallest teens will break through the board almost as easily as the hulking, muscular ones.

Campers can't just walk in off the street and accomplish this feat no more than parents can motivate their son or daughter with a pep talk. That's why we put it close to the end of the session. By now they have a much higher level of confidence and focus than they had before they arrived.

We talk to the campers about the reasons they might have had for not reaching their goals in the past. Maybe they got lazy and decided it wasn't worth the effort. Maybe they failed and let their fear of failure hold them back. But this exercise is about putting the past where it belongs. Today is about making new choices.

By this point in the program, they've all chosen a goal to pursue. We ask them to think of the goal they've set for themselves. We ask them to envision achieving that goal, to make it a reality. Then they write their goals on the boards.

This board is the obstacle that has come between you and your dreams. What is it that's holding you back from what you really want? Be honest.

When they have their answers, they pick up their pens and write their obstacles on the board - on the opposite side from their goal. An inch of pine now stands between them and their dreams.

The facilitators and their teammates gather around. The support is strong. One by one, they break through the barriers and grab their goals! All around us teens are laughing, crying, hugging, and holding up the broken pieces of their boards. The confidence radiating from their faces is beautiful.

The camp session ends one day later and the campers head home with their broken boards in tow and a level of motivation they've never before felt. It's a beautiful thing.

While orchestrating an event of this magnitude in one's home is a little unrealistic for parents, the value of helping a young person break through a personal barrier simply by being there as moral support can not be overestimated. More help for parents in the form of videos and articles is available at our website, in our blogs and in a monthly e-newsletter.

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About the Author:



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Bobbi DePorter, teen motivation and accelerated learning expert, has changed the lives of over five million kids through her SuperCamp and Quantum Learning school programs. SuperCamp is a learning and life skills summer program with more than 56,000 graduates in the U.S., Europe, Asia and Latin America. Quantum Learning is an accelerated learning-based teaching and learning methodology that has helped improve thousands of schools and districts across the nation. Bobbi is the author of more than a dozen books, including *The Seven Biggest Teen Problems and how to turn them into Strengths (An Insider's Look at What Works with Teens)*. For more information, visit <http://www.SuperCamp.com> and <http://www.QLN.com>. Contact Bobbi at bdeporter@qln.com.