



# Self-Motivation

*What Is It and How Do We Use It to Empower Children?*



*What lies behind us and what lies in front of us are but tiny matters as compared to what lies within us.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson



As a child, I was told, “Anything easily obtained is cheaply held.” My parents were trying to tell me that that people don’t usually value things that are just handed to them. They felt it was better to work for things you wanted. I think that maxim could also be stated as “Anything easily *attained* is cheaply held.” I believe when children have to stretch themselves to master new learning they are more motivated and more appreciative of what they achieve. This chapter explores the nature of motivation and explains how teachers and parents can empower students by increasing their capacity for *self-motivation*. Motivated learners are willing to seek more learning, which is one of the requisites for being successful.

Self-motivation is severely damaged when learners experience a sense of *entitlement*. There is a growing concern about

the increasing manifestation of entitlement attitudes exhibited by many children in our nation today. “Entitlement” is the term used in this case to describe the belief that people have a right to happiness rather than the duty to construct it for themselves. It is the idea that people are endowed with the right to have certain benefits and material goods whether they have been earned. Brian Russell, a licensed psychologist; attorney-at-law; and familiar national television pundit on psychological, legal and cultural issues, states the following:

Well-meaning parents are the foremost instillers and nurturers of entitlement attitudes. When they go beyond satisfying all of their children’s needs and start satisfying all of the children’s wants as well, these parents not only “spoil” the kids figuratively, but they also literally spoil the kids’ chances of learning how to manage resources responsibly. When kids learn to expect excess rather than to anticipate scarcity, they learn to expect needs and wants to be satisfied equally rather than to differentiate and prioritize between and among them. They also learn to expect others to make sacrifices for them rather than to be self-reliant. (Russel, 2009, para. 3)

If in fact today’s young people are more prone to feelings of entitlement than were their predecessors, what is the cause? *Wall Street Journal* writer Jeffrey Zaslow, in his article “The Entitlement Epidemic, Who’s Really to Blame?” (2007), answers his question this way:

**The self-esteem movement** [among others]. In 1986, California created a state task force on self-esteem. Schools nationwide later adopted “everybody’s a winner” philosophies. One teacher told me that her superiors advised her to tell students that she liked their smiles, or the way they sat up straight, rather than focusing on, say, their failed spelling tests.

The *self-esteem movement* can be traced back to the 1970s. During that time, I was a parent and a teacher. I bought into the idea that helping kids feel good about themselves was the most important contribution I could make to their interests and, ultimately, to society's benefit. I have changed my mind about how I can best equip learners for a lifetime of successful living. I am convinced that neither I nor anyone else can inspire a child to be successful long term through superficial praise, external rewards, or a hesitance to give them accurate feedback.

Early in my teaching career, the trend was to build children's self-esteem by making sure everyone was a winner. The self-esteem movement is based on the belief that if we make kids feel good about themselves, despite their lack of accomplishment, their positive perceptions will translate into better schoolwork. We did everything we could to keep them from failing at anything. Sometimes, we curved grades, *dumbed down* the curriculum, and gave awards to everyone so that no one felt left out.

There is nothing wrong with wanting a person to feel better about himself. However, esteem needs to be attached to substantive accomplishments, courageous acts, extended insights, and the like. In the 1970s during one of our State Department of Education's programs to raise student self-esteem, I was given an array of activities to implement with my middle grade students. In one activity, I was directed to have them put their ink-covered thumbs on a piece of white poster board. After all the thumbprints were collected on the class poster, we were supposed to discuss the importance of individuality and then close by chanting, "I am 'thumb-body.'" My middle school students laughed aloud at the *lameness* (as they called it) of the exercise. I had to agree. It was pretty silly.

Not that all well-meaning attempts to raise student's self-esteem are ineffective, but I think some are tremendously misinformed. You cannot change a person's self-image long term with a one-shot motivational speaker, positive attitude posters, or by chanting, "I am thumb-body." Even a very powerful person in your life telling you that you are attractive, you are smart, you are talented, you are capable, and so on will not

change your self-image very much or for very long. Rather than concerning ourselves with self-esteem, we would better serve our students with attention to *self-efficacy*.

## **Albert Bandura and Self-Efficacy**

Albert Bandura (1997) introduced a psychological construct he calls *self-efficacy*. Through his research as a psychologist and researcher, he concluded that the foundation for human motivation is not just about believing one has certain qualities but rather that one believes she has power over her life. Self-efficacy beliefs provide the basis for human motivation because unless people believe they can affect changes in their circumstances and their lives, they have little incentive to act or to persevere through difficult situations.

Self-efficacy is unlike other qualities such as self-esteem because self-efficacy can differ greatly from one task or domain to another. A person may have very high self-efficacy about learning to Zumba dance and very low self-efficacy concerning learning trigonometry. It is also important to note that self-efficacy judgments are not necessarily related to an individual's actual ability to perform a task; rather, they are based on the person's beliefs about that ability.

Bandura (1997) speculates that people with high-perceived self-efficacy tend to feel they have more control over their environment and, therefore, experience less uncertainty. Individuals are more likely to select tasks and activities in which they feel competent and confident. They are apt to avoid those in which they do not feel that way. The higher the sense of self-efficacy, the greater the intrinsic motivation and effort people put toward their goals. They will pursue their course longer and with more diligence than will someone who is not self-efficacious. Research also clearly indicates that people with a highly evolved sense of self-efficacy recover from failure and setbacks more quickly than do those who do not.

Self-efficacy is bolstered when a student achieves something previously thought unattainable. Overcoming initial failure is a powerful incentive for further pursuits. We should

provide students with numerous examples of ordinary people who have become extraordinary by overcoming failure repeatedly. We ought to model for them how to learn from missteps and how to stay true to their goals. We have to help students understand that their efforts and their choices make a tremendous difference in outcomes.

### **SELF-EFFICACY AFFECTS**

- The **choices** we make
- The **effort** we put forth (how hard we try)
- Our **perseverance** (how long we persist when we confront obstacles)
- Our **resilience** (how quickly we recover from failure or setbacks)

Bandura believes that verbal persuasion may temporarily convince people they should try or should avoid some tasks, but finally, it is one's direct or "vicarious experience" with success or failure that will most strongly influence one's self-efficacy. He maintains that high degrees of self-efficacy are built over time and from many sources, but the most influential events that shape positive self-efficacy are mastery through purposeful effort. In later studies, Bandura demonstrates that people can learn from watching others they view as similar to themselves. Learning through viewing models is not as strong as mastery experience in helping create self-efficacy beliefs, but the effects of modeling can contribute to observers' beliefs about their capabilities (i.e., "If she can do it, so can I.").

### **Motivation or *Self-Motivation?***

It is a misnomer to say, "It is the teacher's job to motivate students." Motivation is not something we can give anyone

or do to someone. It is not necessarily transferred from an enthusiastic adult to an uninspired student. The more accurate term to use is *self-motivation*. Self-motivation is what ignites a learner; it is the internal voice that says, "I am an autonomous person who has power over my choices and my actions. I can affect positive changes in my life if I work for them."

In 2000, Ryan and Deci concluded that if adults want to foster the most high-quality forms of enhanced performance, creativity, and persistence, they must design activities that give students a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They agree that the optimal state of self-motivation resides in the learner and must be fostered by the teacher. Oftentimes, a student's sense of entitlement is at cross-purposes with the awareness of self-motivation.

In working with educators and parents throughout the country, I sometimes hear the common question, "Kids today are so hard to motivate; what is wrong with them?" Typical complaints I hear from adults today are the following:

"My siblings and I could entertain ourselves with nothing but a can and a stick. Kids today are basically lazy, spoiled, and need to be constantly entertained!"

"My son gives up at the first sign of discouragement. It's like he thinks he can be the next Michael Jordan by just wishing it!"

"My child told me she didn't ask to be born—it was *my* choice. She acts like it is my responsibility to make sure she's not bored. Kids today are so self-absorbed."

"My students won't do their homework, and don't even think about asking them to do something hard! If it's not easy, they just quit."

"Our 12-year-old says he hates school because it is boring. If he had his way, he'd just stay in his room and play video games from morning to night."

Most parents and teachers yearn for students who are eager to learn new things. Some adults look hopefully toward the next advanced technical device or revolutionary new product that will make children *want* to learn. They wring their hands in frustration over what they consider unmotivated students.

Actually, the concept of the *unmotivated child* is an anomaly. Kids start out as interactive discoverers of the world and are naturally curious explorers. Everyone has a basic desire for recognition and productivity. We are hardwired to enjoy achievement and to overcome obstacles in our paths. Consider the toddler who has just figured out she can open a kitchen cabinet and explore the contents within. She is quite resolute in her pursuit of removing pots and pans. Even if a saucepan lid lands heavily on her leg or if she scrapes her arm trying to push too close to the edge of the cabinet, she will continue her mission. She is determined and resolved. She approaches her undertaking with a tireless zeal. Any interference with her purposeful task by an outsider (e.g., Mom or Dad) will be met with vigorous objection and vocal displeasure. The child is self-motivated and wants to learn about this unexplored territory. Once all the objects that were previously neatly stored in the cabinet are displaced on the kitchen floor, she is off to conquer new worlds.

Think about the teenager yearning to drive a car. With all the talk about apathetic teens who seemingly cannot read well, communicate coherently, or even remember important homework assignments, is it not amazing how most of them are able to pass written and manual driver's tests? These same supposed slackers usually show up on time for and are able to pass a thorough written exam. If they fail it the first time, they voluntarily continue to take the test until they finally demonstrate enough mastery to move on to the performance assessment. For the next phase, they show up on time, use every cogent communication skill they can muster to talk with their examiner, and under extremely stressful conditions manage to maneuver the vehicle with enough proficiency to pass the final part of their test. Who does not remember the thrill and the pride of receiving that first driver's license?

## Try This

Let's be clear about what we are talking about when I use the term self-motivation. I want you to think of something you have accomplished in the last few years—something important to you, something you really wanted to do. It can be a goal, an accomplishment, something you wanted to learn, something you wanted to win, or just something you wanted to finish. When you first thought about it, you may not have been very sure about whether you would be successful, but it is something you had to try for yourself.

*(Okay, I see you trying to continue reading here without doing this exercise. Don't do that. Seriously, this will mean more to you if you stop and do this little mental exercise.)*

Now picture the steps you had to take to attain your goal—the big ones and the little ones. Maybe your friends and family were on your side saying things such as this:

"I know you can do it."

"I'm here to help."

"You've got what it takes."

"Don't give up."

Or maybe they weren't so supportive. Maybe you heard things such as this:

"You've got to be dreaming."

"Don't you think that goal is a little ambitious for someone like you?"

"You know you always have the great ideas, but you never follow through." *(You get the idea).*

The point is it really doesn't matter what *they* said or did. What matters is what *you* did to achieve your objective. You



probably had to do some things you had never done before—take some risks, stretch your abilities, and work harder than you ever had before. And just as important, you had to give up some things—a safe zone, maybe some sleep, maybe some comforts. But in the process, you committed your heart and soul to the thing you wanted. You did whatever it took.

Do you remember how you felt the moment you realized it finally happened—when you had that one brief shining moment of realization that you *did* it? *You did it*. I wasn't there, but I'll bet you felt like putting your fists on your hips, sticking out your chest, and shouting a "TUH-Tuh-Tuh-DAH!" superhero call.

### **TUH-Tuh-Tuh-DAH! for Kids**

I'll bet you also felt like you could do more of the same thing you just did and were willing to try. Is there anything more gratifying for a child than to accomplish something that she was heretofore unable to attain? Think about the sheer joy for the girl when she puts her entire heart and soul into a directed effort. At first success evades her, but she continues to try new strategies, to patiently build a repertoire of skills until she finally makes it happen. Immediately the child gleefully proclaims, "I did it! *I did it!*" Then she often asks, "Did you see that?" Finally, she announces, "I did it all by myself!" Generally, at that point, the child is ready and more than willing to proceed to the next level.

That moment holds one of the greatest feelings in the entire world. And I want that feeling for all our children today. I want kids to have more TUH-Tuh-Tuh-DAH! moments in their school days and at home. My belief is that those moments can provide a carryover effect that keeps us moving forward through the moments that aren't so spectacular.

Unfortunately, in a world of enabled, entitled, protected offspring, we have robbed them of the very essence of what builds resilience, persistence, courage, patience, and joy. We rush in to make sure children feel good all the time. We don't want to risk getting their egos bruised or their comfort zones violated.

Moreover, we sometimes behave in ways that imply the only way to get kids to do anything taxing or responsible is to make them do it.

**Amy Chua, Author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother***

Amy Chua, Yale law professor, recently created quite a controversy over her contention that her Chinese and other Eastern cultures do a much better job rearing children than do traditional Western parents. She contends that children never want to work hard on their own, so parents must force them to work hard now and learn to reap the rewards later. Although I agree with her view that there is an overreliance on self-esteem in the Western world, I disagree with her on the issue of whether children are intrinsically motivated. Behaviorists, in general, believe that the only way to get children to comply is to coerce them either overtly or covertly.

However, I have seen countless children work hard on their own, with virtually no input from an adult. I am old enough that when I was pregnant I did not know the sex of my unborn children. Sonograms had not yet reached their zenith in the rural area of Louisiana where I lived. I had two boys and was expecting a third baby. My nine-year-old and my six-year-old decided that if the new arrival was not of male origin, they would be forced to abandon our family forever. They devised a plan and enlisted their two best friends, also brothers, to pursue it. We lived on a 42-acre plot of wooded land etched by a tributary to a nearby river. The boys decided they would dig a pond near our backyard that would eventually connect to the creek leading to the river. Their plan was to build a raft capable of sailing them to the river, and if a female child was born, they would sail away, never to be heard from again.

I laughed when I heard their preposterous idea, but I figured even if they dug up some of the yard, it wouldn't matter. With no provocation or assistance from any adults, these two nine-year-olds and their six-year-old brothers began their labor of

love. It was summer, so every day they were able to devote the full day to digging in the hard dirt. In Louisiana during the summer, the heat and the humidity are stifling, but the boys were undaunted. Filthy with grime and sweat, they paused only for food, refreshment, and other essential needs. They worked from sunrise to sunset every day for weeks. My oldest, usually the leader of the pack, devised a work schedule and a division of labor that would have delighted the Army Corps of Engineers. While two dug, two cut and stripped small saplings for the raft. They worked tirelessly. I began to worry when the hole reached proportions of about 100 square feet and a depth of three to four feet. But on they worked. I'm not sure how long this would have gone on, but eventually my third son was born, so the river project was moot, and the boys moved on to other endeavors. The hole they dug was so large that when it rained it really did create a pond of sorts, and they enjoyed the use of it for years. My point is that I have seldom seen children work as hard at anything in my entire life. Of their own volition, with their ingenuity, and without any adult meddling, these boys performed hour upon hour of backbreaking labor toward a goal they set for themselves. And they loved every minute of it. They were truly self-motivated. (TUH-Tuh-Tuh-DAH!)

I have watched children in skateboard areas try to master new techniques. They fall down. They get up and try again. They get scrapes and bruises and keep trying. They do the same moves over and over and over. They do not get bored, whine, or complain. They keep trying until they master the desired skill. TUH-Tuh-Tuh-DAH! They are truly self-motivated. Unlike Ms. Chua and other behaviorist advocates, I think children are naturally motivated to do many things.

### **Adults Need to Work in Tandem With Children's Motivation**

I am not saying that children should be allowed to pursue only what interests them at the exact moment. Often, it is hard for them to see the big picture and understand the things they will

need to attain mastery. They do not yet understand that some steps are really building blocks for future pursuits. I think part of the adult's job is to explain those things to children—to help them see relevance in their endeavors. I still maintain that children are intrinsically motivated, and with the proper kind of feedback, they can learn all sorts of necessary skills and self-sustaining learning practices.

I don't think the goal of most adults is to act as policing agents who enforce our desires on our reluctant subordinates. We would much prefer that children make wise choices, and we would like to be able to support their pursuit of them. We would rather not force kids to do things against their wills. So how do we set about capitalizing on what is already there—children's natural enthusiasm for becoming independent learners? How do we provide every child with more TUH-Tuh-Tuh-DAH moments? We need to examine purposefully how adults can foster that very special kind of motivation in our children as well as in ourselves.

Edward Deci, codeveloper of *self-determination theory* and a researcher who has expertise in intrinsic motivation, is convinced that children seek the novel and are eager to learn until adults get in the way:

For young children, learning is a primary occupation; it is what they do naturally and with considerable intensity when they are not preoccupied with satisfying their hunger or dealing with their parents' demands. (1995, p. 19)

One might ask, "If children are so naturally inquisitive, what happens to their drive and enthusiasm as they grow older?" One explanation is that as individuals interact with their environment they take in all kinds of feedback. Their attempts to problem solve meet with varying degrees of success and failure. Individuals evaluate themselves, and they consider the responses of others in their lives, particularly important adults. All of the input shapes the individual's self-identity. Many times, the perceived self is quite different from the actual

self, but growing research indicates people act more in accord with their self-perception than with reality.

## Entitlement or Empowerment?

We need to shift our focus from doling out unmetered praise in hopes of raising their self-esteem to helping them understand the power they have in making positive choices and sustained efforts. We should worry less about entertaining kids and more about engaging them in meaningful tasks that encourage self-motivation. To help our young people feel the confidence of self-efficacy and empower them with resilience, we have to avoid filling them with an entitlement mentality. Next are some examples of how adults can begin this process.

### Sample Adult Statements

- Entitling:** “You are all in the top math group, and this test is going to be a piece of cake for you. I know you are all going to make me proud by scoring higher than anyone in the state! Let me hear you say it, ‘I am thumb-body!’”
- Empowering:** “You have shown tremendous growth in your math reasoning strategies this year. You have practiced some of the exact kinds of problems in class and successfully solved them. Just take your time and use the skills you have already mastered.”
- Entitling:** “You won this tournament last year, and you are a shoo-in to win today. Your brother won this title two years in a row, and you will, too. Everybody knows you are a superstar!”
- Empowering:** “You are prepared, and you have done all the things needed to get you here today. You have demonstrated your athletic skills repeatedly in

this game. You are likely to meet some fierce competition today, but you've done that before. Go out there and put your heart and your soul into it. Do your best, and let the rest take care of itself."

**Entitling:** "Well, since you are about the right age for one, we're going to let you get a puppy. But don't expect us to feed it or take care of it. That is going to be your job. If you don't do what you are supposed to, that dog goes back to the shelter. Do you hear me? I mean it."

**Empowering:** "You have shown your father and me that you can be responsible to do important tasks without being prompted. We have watched you play with the neighbor's dog and noticed how gentle and kind you are with her. We have decided you are someone who would make a reliable pet owner. Yes, you may have a puppy."

**Entitling:** "With your natural ability you are going to go far! You have more talent in your little finger than most other kids have in their entire bodies! This is effortless for you. You are going to be a superstar one day. That's for sure!"

**Empowering:** "You really seem to have a knack for this. And more important, you seem to love the craft. If you want to continue to improve, you're going to have to keep challenging yourself to work on all areas of your art. Keep practicing and stay focused. It will be fun to see how far you want to go with this."

**Entitling:** "I really can't afford to buy you those expensive sports shoes, but I don't want you to be the only kid in class who doesn't have them."

We'll get them, but I want you to take good care of them, okay?"

**Empowering:** "I certainly understand your desire to wear the same kind of shoes as the rest of your friends. However, I don't have that much money in my budget for clothing. Here's what I'll do. I'll give you the money I set back for shoes, and if you decide you want more expensive shoes, you can make up the difference with your money."

**Entitling:** "I'll be interested to see how you gifted-and-talented students do in the science fair. You all have what it takes to have the best projects ever. I'll be waiting anxiously to see your presentations in six weeks. I just know we are going to sweep the ribbons this year."

**Empowering:** "I've heard some very interesting ideas from you for your science fair projects. Great ideas are an important start, but remember that these projects also require a long-term commitment to the design, data collection, and final presentation. Be sure to pick a topic that interests you, and here's a checklist with timelines to guide you. If you start now, you will have enough time to do a thorough job on each phase. I'll be meeting with you each week to check on your progress and answer your questions."

These illustrations are certainly not exhaustive, but I think you get the idea. The onus for success must be put back where it belongs—within the control of the learner. With students, we need to do a better job of connecting outcomes to effort. Chapters 4 and 5 elaborate further on that concept. Chapter 2 explains the theory behind the idea of raising the bar for learners.