

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

MOTIVATING AN

UNMOTIVATED

CHILD

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MOTIVATING AN UNMOTIVATED CHILD

- A motivational problem is not always easy to define, but teachers have no trouble recognizing it. This is the student whose attitude toward schoolwork screams “I don’t care.” He is highly motivated when it comes to schoolwork — motivated to avoid it. He puts more work into avoiding academic challenges than tackling them. While his test scores may convey high potential, his classroom performance may suggest something else. When given an assignment, he may shrug his shoulders and complain “Why do we have to do this?” and then give up at the first sign of trouble. He is often content with just getting by.
- In working with an unmotivated student, you face two challenges. The first is to change his thinking so that he comes to believe that he can be successful with academic tasks if he puts forth effort. The second is to figure out what does motivate him, namely to identify the settings, situations, and conditions that he responds to and can be used to foster his interest.

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What Can You Do?

- I. Interrupt the student's cycle of failure. An unmotivated student is often a demoralized student. Try to alter his perceptions by orchestrating some positive academic experiences. Assign him work that he is capable of completing successfully but still gives him a feeling of accomplishment. Try to structure the assignment so that the beginning section is relatively easy, hopefully giving him the confidence to move on. If he struggles with a task, focus on what he has done well while gently correcting his mistakes without criticizing him. Help him understand that setbacks and mistakes are a normal part of the learning process. As he begins to enjoy more success, his confidence will grow and he will hopefully become more willing to take risks.

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2. Give the student a choice of assignments. He may be more likely to put forth effort if he has a say in the assignment. You might give him three assignments to choose from, each of which helps meet your objective. In studying the Civil War, for example, you might allow him to do a book report, make an oral presentation, or do a related art project. Of course, you still reserve the right to require him to do certain essential assignments. Consider other ways to give the child some ownership over the learning process, for example, by having him choose the book he will read or the topic for a paper or allowing him to choose the reward or classroom privilege he will receive if he reaches a goal.

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What Can You Do?

3. Incorporate the student's interests into your lesson. Find out about some of the student's interests (you might have him complete an interest inventory) and then try to integrate them into your lessons or classroom activities. If he has a paper route, for example, you might design math problems requiring him to calculate how much he would earn delivering papers under various conditions. If you are doing a transportation unit and you know the student builds model airplanes, have him bring in some models to show the class. If he is talented at art, have him help you design your bulletin boards. If he excels on the computer, have him become the class troubleshooter.

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What Can You Do?

4. Help your students see the relevance of the lesson to real life. Students who are unmotivated often want to know “Why do I have to know this?” Help them see how the lessons of the classroom can be applied to life outside the classroom.
 - When teaching different shapes, have students point out examples of shapes in the classroom.
 - Show how being able to count is essential when buying things at the store.
 - In teaching about plant life, have your students make a leaf collection.
 - You might plan field trips that show how the lessons they are learning work in real life. For example, if you are doing a unit on the environment, plan a trip to a recycling center.

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5. Break the task into manageable doses. Some students may put forth little effort because they perceive the task as too overwhelming. If so, present the task in small chunks. Give the student one step at a time and don't move on until he has mastered that step. As he gains skill and confidence, you can gradually expand the size of the task, give him more difficult problems, or move at a somewhat faster pace. Apply this same approach to homework. If the student struggles with math and rarely completes assignments, consider giving him half the problems of the other students, selecting problems you are confident he can do.

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What Can You Do?

6. Alter your teaching style to spark the student's interest. You may find that a student who is in the dark when listening to classroom lectures may suddenly light up when given hands-on activities. For example, you might have students conduct a debate about a controversial historical issue, conduct an experiment to demonstrate a science principle, or do a cooking project to help them understand different types of measurement. These activities not only stimulate students' interests but also help them retain concepts.

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What Can You Do?

7. Focus on the student's progress rather than his performance relative to peers. A student who is constantly compared to classmates who outperform him will eventually become so discouraged that he will shut down in school. You can avoid this by focusing on his improvement rather than his performance relative to his classmates. You might evaluate the student through a portfolio assessment in which you examine his work during the year and consider his progress as a measure of his performance. The student may receive a boost in confidence by seeing through a review of his work samples how much his work has improved over the course of the year.

- Adapted from:

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