

# MOTIVATING YOUR INTELLIGENT BUT UNMOTIVATED TEENAGER



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# Introduction

You're reading this book because you're frustrated. You have a highly intelligent son or daughter who is not doing what is necessary for academic success. Their priorities are mixed-up, or they are not taking school seriously, they don't understand the importance of an education, or they lack motivation to complete their work.

You're not only frustrated; you are worried, perhaps heartsick. Knowing the relationship between academic success and eventual life satisfaction, you're anxious that your children will forever be behind life's eight-ball. You fear that they are digging a hole from which they will not be able to emerge. It's not just grades that have you worried—*it's their life.*



You're exhausted by the incessant battles over schoolwork. Tired of your daily routine revolving around academic issues, you're concerned that your relationship with your child has been contaminated by this never-ending focus on all things school-related. The rewards, the incentives, the punishments, the arguments, the screaming matches, the denial of privileges, the groundings—all done in the name of motivation and all unsuccessful—have worn you down.

You wouldn't be reading this book if your attempts were working. You are an involved, committed, conscientious parent. Your efforts are logical, reasonable, and grounded in common sense. Your well-intentioned efforts to motivate your teenager are beyond all criticism except one: *they haven't worked.* They simply haven't produced the results you had hoped for.



Like most of us human beings, when what we do isn't working, our tendency is to do more of it, or do it with more intensity, or do it louder. You think, "If the one-millionth time he's heard this hasn't worked, maybe the one-million-and-first time will do the trick." You believe that your persistence will result in your teenager "finally getting it through his head" that he must do better in school. Even when it doesn't.

There are, virtually without exception, two directions parents take when trying to motivate a recalcitrant adolescent:

- ▶ **the application of external consequences (incentives and punishments)**
- ▶ **words, words, and more words, delivered with increasing emotion**

You have probably utilized one or a combination of these efforts. When one punishment hasn't worked, you've tried another and perhaps another, hoping that you'll find just the *right* punishment delivered with *just the right* amount of adversity that the motivational light will go on. And you've talked, Lord knows you've talked: lectured, sermonized, prodded, cajoled, exhorted, pleaded, explained, threatened, scolded, reprimanded, badgered, painted pictures of dire futures, spoke of flipping burgers—all to no avail.

I have come to believe that parents punish and lecture in this fashion because they don't know what else to do. They don't actually expect that it will work (although they hope it might), but they can't abide the notion of doing nothing in the face of their teenager's failures.



When your efforts aren't working (and yours aren't, or you wouldn't be reading this) what's called for is a change in course. That is what this book provides. Grounded in both research and common sense regarding motivation, we will explore:

- ▶ **why your efforts aren't working**
- ▶ **why teenagers aren't motivated by rewards, punishments, or pleas to logic.**
- ▶ **why teenagers decide to change**
- ▶ **what you can do to encourage this change**
- ▶ **what you need no longer do because it won't work**
- ▶ **how to never argue with your teenager about school (or for that matter, anything) again.**

Let's get started.



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# §Chapter One

## Six Fundamental Facts

**Most parents misunderstand motivation.** They know (or *think* they know) what motivates *them* and believe, in a one-size-fits-all fashion, that it will work for their teenagers, and are puzzled when it does not. They have a strong but unfounded faith in the power of incentives and/or punishments to motivate their adolescents. They place much emphasis on logical thinking, believing that an appeal to common sense and reason will help their children “see the light.” And they believe it is essential to be positive and encouraging.



While all of this conventional wisdom makes sense, it actually flies in the face of what we know about motivation. Let’s look at six fundamental notions about this concept:

### 1. Motivation is not a matter of “rah-rah.”

When you want to motivate people, your tendency is to get behind them with a lot of enthusiasm. You may give them a pep talk, or try to rouse them with “I-know-you-can-do-it” or “Get-in-there-and-make-it-happen” sort of cheerleading. You might decide to compliment them, list their skills and positive attributes, or tell them how smart they are. Perhaps you tell them what you hope will be inspirational stories, or relate a personal anecdote describing how you prevailed in a similar circumstance.



These efforts rarely work. Have you ever listened to a motivational speaker? Were you inspired? How long did that inspiration last? Did that inspiration turn into goal-oriented behavior? And did those behavior changes last? If you are like most people in this regard, your motivation was likely short-lived.

Why? There are several reasons, some of which will be discussed later in this book. For our present purposes, it is useful to know this: the reaction to this kind of over-enthusiastic cheerleading, especially for people who are demoralized or disheartened, is actually *demotivating*. It produces the *opposite* result of that which you intend. Because the person you are trying to motivate with these efforts doesn't believe the positive things being said about him, it is not only *not* motivating, it makes him feel *guilty*. He feels unworthy of your praiseful

words. Therefore your well-intentioned efforts have a doubly negative effect: the person is now less motivated than before with the added bonus of guilt. Congratulations.

An additional unwelcome effect of this enthusiasm is that you have now lost all credibility with this person you are trying to pump up. Since his belief about himself is that he is much less capable than you think, he views you as someone who doesn't understand him or his circumstance. And if you don't understand him, why should he listen to you?

A fundamental error made by parents using this approach is that they are *not listening* to their children. If you are not listening, you can't conceivably understand. When you don't understand, your fulminating praise comes across not as positive but *patronizing*. And if you have ever



been patronized, you know that it doesn't feel good. The motivating relationship has been crippled before it has ever gotten off the ground.

Now, to say that you should not engage in over-the-top enthusiasm is not an invitation to be negative or pessimistic. Pointing out negative implications of your teenager's behavior is also not motivating (especially because they are already well-aware of these implications). But there are options other than being all sweetness-and-light on the one hand and the bearer of ugly tidings on the other. This will be made clear as we continue.

## **2. Carrots and sticks are rarely motivational.**

Our culture has long had an abiding faith in the ability of externally-applied consequences to alter

behavior. We believe that if the consequences are sufficiently unpleasant, people will change their behavior to avoid that discomfort. We hold this belief even though there is little evidence to support it.

Now, there are certainly people in this world who will act to avoid pain, this writer included. I am not saying that no one responds to external consequences. Punishment, when effective, is simple, straight-forward, and easy. But in your case, your adolescent is not one of those people or you would not currently be engaged in reading this book. Our collective faith in the power of consequences reflects the one-size-fits-all approach to motivation that characterizes so many of our efforts. Let's look at a few examples:



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The recidivism rate in this country—that is, the rate at which criminals return to jail after release from incarceration—has hovered around 70% for decades. Now, I understand that time in jail is an unpleasant experience. Despite that fact, seven of ten people released from jail behave in such a way as to return, the unpleasantness notwithstanding.

The United States, through numerous administrations both Republican and Democratic, have maintained economic sanctions against the country of Cuba for almost fifty years in an effort to change the behavior of that government. The behavior remains unchanged.

In a well-known experiment that you may have read about in school, frogs were placed in a beaker of warm water from which they could easily escape. The temperature of the water was gradually increased until the frogs boiled to death even

though they could, with little effort, avoid that unpleasant outcome.

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While these examples describe the efforts of criminals, governments, and frogs, they also apply to teenagers. Change does not occur only for the purpose of avoiding pain or achieving a reward—it is a more complex process than that. There are complicated considerations that do not simply respond to outside influences. And that is especially true of durable motivation, the type that endures.

The effectiveness of these external influences is especially diluted when the teenager is demoralized, disheartened, or depressed. It is not uncommon for unmotivated adolescents to feel overwhelmed or anxious regarding their school work but mask these emotions behind a façade of ennui or disinterest.

When demoralized, teens tend to fold up in place rather than move to avoid the discomfort, which is why such efforts tend to be ineffective.

As a teenager I saw the film “Cool Hand Luke.” Luke, played by Paul Newman, was a prisoner on a chain gang. He escaped, was caught, and placed in handcuffs. He escaped again, was again caught, and leg irons were added. He escaped a third time and was brutalized by camp guards. The warden, addressing the assembled convicts, explained that this treatment would continue “until Luke got his mind right.” Luke never did get his mind right, and was eventually killed by those trying to change his behavior.

I often think of this movie when I’m working with parents who use punishment ineffectually to motivate their teenagers. Their approach, while not as

extreme, follows the same concept: “We’re going to keep doing this until your grades improve, even in the face of evidence that it is totally ineffective.”

We’ll discuss this concept in greater length when we examine why teenagers decide to change their behavior. Until then, reflect on a notion of which you, through experience, are all-too-aware: punishment is unlikely to get the motivational job done.

### **3. Our understanding of the relationship between motivation and performance is backwards.**

You, like most of us, have made some variation of the following statement: “When I get motivated, I’m going to \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., lose ten pounds, clean the basement, read *War and Peace*).” This



statement contains within it a fundamental flaw in thinking that marks many approaches to motivation: that one must become motivated in order to perform.

When we think this way, we have unnecessarily over-complicated the change process by taking a one-step process—performance—and turning it into a process that requires two steps—motivation *followed by* performance. And in doing so, we have surrendered to the delusion that *we know how to motivate ourselves*, that somehow, sitting in the easy chair, we engage in some manner of psychic effort that results in us getting up and, say, cleaning the garage.

Here is how we actually motivate ourselves to clean the garage: We decide, somehow, to clean the garage, we start doing so and, in the cleaning of it, we discover some value in the task we are performing. *Or . . .* the garage is a mess, we can't find something

we're searching for, we begin to clean to find it, the corner of the garage starts to look good and the effort feels satisfying, and we continue. *Or . . .* we have ten minutes to kill, we sweep a small area, we like what we see, and we continue sweeping. *Or . . .* your partner makes you an offer like “What do you say we get up Saturday, clean the garage, and then go to lunch?” *Or . . .* you get the picture.

The crucial notion is this: we don't get motivated and then do something. Instead, we *do* something and *then get motivated*. Motivation does not precede performance. Rather it is just the opposite: *Performance precedes motivation*. It is in the *doing* of the act that we discover the motivation.

Thus the key is *not* to try to get your teenager motivated (which has previously involved ineffective consequences and useless verbiage) but to instead *do*

*something different* to try to get him to perform. Your concern is to get the desired behavior started, not to change the mind of your teenager (a difficult if not impossible—but thankfully unnecessary—task). And a common bonus is this: when behavior changes, minds change.

The following anecdote illustrates two of my favorite aphorisms: “You never know where change may come from” and “It’s often a matter of toppling that first domino.”

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Jason was a 14-year-old eighth-grader who was doing no homework. Consequently, he was failing all of his classes. His parents were beside themselves with exasperation and anxiety, and the family interaction was marked by the usual arguments and punishments with the occasional screaming match thrown in for good measure. The

only result of the parents’ efforts to motivate Jason was increased acrimony.

In talking with Jason I discovered that he was very interested in gambling and games of chance. I gave him the following assignment: at the end of each school day, he was to roll a playing die and, whatever number came up, he was to do that class period’s homework and that homework only. He seemed intrigued by this task and agreed to do it. His parents were dismayed by the assignment because they wished him to do *all* of his homework, but my interest was in *getting something started* in the direction of the overall goal.

When the family returned for their subsequent appointment in two weeks, Jason had very dutifully done one assignment each night. When I asked if he might be interested in adding an additional assignment, he reported that he was content with completing just one. His parents were mildly encouraged but still unsatisfied—after

all, completing only one assignment per night guaranteed continued failure.

Upon their return two weeks later, he had still done one assignment per night. But when we met two weeks thereafter, he was doing *all* of his homework. His parents were pleased but understandably skeptical. The nightly harangues had stopped, although the parents could not restrain themselves from prompting him to do even more. When I asked Jason how he had accomplished this improvement, he introduced his explanation with the following statement: “Well, you see, there is this girl . . .”

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“This girl” had noticed Jason submitting completed homework assignments and said to him, “I always thought you were kind of a loser until I saw you taking your homework seriously.” From that point forward, he couldn’t do enough homework. As a consequence of increased homework completion,



others related to him differently, especially his parents and teachers, as well as his peers. He began to see, for himself, the value of diligently doing his homework.

Notice in this example that no one set out to motivate Jason. His improvement was not the result of punishment, reward, or “rah-rah.” He was neither coerced nor incentivized into improvement. But his performance resulted in a change in his world. This performance seemed to be prompted by a non-punitive, seemingly random suggestion that resulted in his discovery of his own motivation that was inherently valuable to him.

This is clearly not a solution for all kids in his circumstance, nor is there any way that I could have predicted this outcome. But it does illustrate the key maxim that *performance precedes motivation*. The



change came from a source that was totally unpredictable. And one small behavior (the rolling of dice) led to a cascade of positive events.

So, rather than attempting to change your teenager's mind, try instead to change his behavior.

#### **4. Motivation is not an individual characteristic.**

The language that is commonly used when talking about motivation suggests that motivation is typically viewed as a personal trait of an individual. “He is not motivated” or “She lacks motivation” or “He is highly motivated” indicate the belief that motivation lies somewhere *within* the individual. Increasingly, research on motivation suggests that this is not the case.

If, like most parents, you hold this belief, then you will attempt to *inject* your teenager with motivation, to get it *inside* of him by any means necessary. These efforts are typically met with unsatisfying results. This is what happens when you “try to get it into” the head of your teenager through incessant lecturing, or when you use punishments to attempt to trigger the motivational button inside him. Since motivation is not a characteristic of an individual, these methods are virtually guaranteed to fail.

There are clearly exceptions to this rule, but they are rare. You have probably known individuals who are temperamentally goal-oriented in a methodical way, people who can set an objective and work toward it in a diligent fashion. But this is not your teenager, or you would not be reading this book.

This finding—that motivation does not lay within the individual—is enlightening, and has significant implications for your efforts in helping your adolescent achieve more success in school. You will not successfully install motivation in your adolescent. But you now know that, along with being unlikely, it is unnecessary. So, if motivation is not an individual trait, what is it? Read on . . .

## **5. Motivation is a function of relationship.**

This finding—that motivation is a matter of relationship—is eye-opening. It is also fraught with meaningful implications regarding your efforts in motivating your teenager. It means that you will no longer try to get motivation *into* your child but instead trying to develop it in the *relationship* between the two of you.

It also requires a re-examination of your relationship with your teenager to determine if your relationship is indeed motivational. Truly motivational relationships are not those in which one of the members is in a *one-up* position, as when an authority directs the behavior of a subordinate. Relationships which are motivational are genuine *partnerships*, where neither member lords power over the other.

Let's use an example. When I consider this concept, I think of the bicyclist Lance Armstrong. People who are aware of his accomplishments—winning seven Tour de France titles after recovering from testicular cancer that had metastasized to his brain—would likely describe him as a highly motivated individual. They may picture his determined ascents up mountains and think of the hours spent turning the cranks of his bicycle in steely isolation.

When I think of Lance Armstrong and his motivation, I think of all the people in his life with whom I presume he enjoys motivating relationships. He has a coach, a trainer, a masseuse, a nutritionist, a dietician, several oncologists, and numerous teammates who served the purpose—intentional or otherwise—of providing the necessary motivation for his prodigious accomplishments. He may well be intrinsically motivated, but he has the benefit of numerous relationships of a motivating nature.

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**A friend of mine, until relatively recently, had been obese for most of her adult life. She is not temperamentally or physically inclined to exercise, and the many diets she has used have all eventually failed. Over the past two years—after twenty years of trying—she has lost sixty pounds. What finally worked when many other efforts had failed?**

**She made a new friend who invited her to join her and other friends in lap-swimming in the local pool. Her lifestyle changed from one that was sedentary to one marked by physical exercise. She didn't especially enjoy swimming, but she enjoyed the camaraderie and socializing that accompanied the activity. And when tempted to not swim by fatigue, or poor weather, or other excuses that often derail solitary ventures, she went to the pool because of the relationships she enjoyed there.**

**Her friends did not “rah-rah” her into losing weight. The weight loss was essentially a by-product of the relationships she enjoyed at the pool. Sometime she swam to be with them, sometimes she swam so as not to disappoint them, and sometimes she actually came to take a bit of pleasure from the swimming. But the key factor that started and maintained the behavior was the relationship.**



Therefore, the critical questions are not “*Is my teenager motivated?*” or “*How do I find the right motivational button inside my child?*” but rather “*Do I have a motivating relationship with my adolescent?*” You have tried to establish one, but have thus far failed. No criticism intended; but read on to learn how to develop the kind of relationship that can help your teenager discover the necessary motivation.

## **6. One person does not motivate another.**

A major focus of my professional work is helping people enhance their performance, whether those people are students who wish to raise their grades, small-business owners who want an improved bottom line, athletes, or anyone desiring to do better in their chosen endeavor. Over the more-than-thirty years that I have been doing this, I have had the pleasure of

watching many people experience the satisfaction of enhanced performance. *And I have never motivated one of these individuals.*

When successful, I believe that what I did was help them *discover their own motivation*. I was able to help them tap into what was truly meaningful to them. I was instrumental in eliciting their intrinsic inspiration for change. I helped them clarify what they wanted. I assisted them in assessing, in a straightforward, honest, yet respectful fashion, whether what they were doing was actually in service of their stated goals or whether they were merely deluding themselves. But I did not motivate them.

Durable motivation is *intrinsic*. People connect the desire to change with something that is internally important to them. This is why punishments and rewards seldom work. It is also why your efforts to

try to inspire your teen to improve have failed. You have tried to motivate her rather than helping her get in touch with her own motivation.

So while the relationship component is crucial in the motivation process, one person does not motivate another. Rather, one can, in ways that will be detailed as you read on, evoke another's personal motivation. I don't motivate you or you me, but it is in the synergy developed within the relationship that motivation can be found.

## SUMMARY

Let's review the major lessons of this first chapter.

- ▶ **Dial back on your enthusiasm, lest you actually de-motivate your teenager.**

- ▶ **If rewards or punishments aren't working, don't keep expecting that suddenly they one day will.**
- ▶ **Instead of trying to change what your teenager thinks, try to start some behavior in the direction of the desired goal.**

And as you read on, you will discover what goes into a motivating relationship so that your teenager can discover the motivation that works for him.



# Chapter Two

## Motivation and Change

There are a number of definitions of motivation.

For our purposes, we will use the following one:

**Motivation = Change-Oriented  
Movement**

This is a definition I favor because it is accurate while being concise. It emphasizes that motivation is a matter of change and that the change is directed toward behavior rather than thinking. And as indicated earlier, when behavior changes, changes in thinking often follow in their wake.



### What makes teenagers change?

Since motivation is all about change, it begs the question: Why do people change? Which circumstances need to come together so that a person, especially a teenage person, decides to do something different? What set of conditions need to be in place so that an individual decides to abandon a particular course of action and take up another?

Conventional wisdom would suggest that teenagers change to avoid discomfort. This does not seem to be the case. Instead, it appears that just the opposite is the case. Bad feelings and unpleasant experiences tend to *immobilize* teenagers rather than spur them to action. This is particularly true if the teenager is discouraged, overwhelmed, or otherwise in a negative state of mind. Thus, the efforts of parents who punish their under-performing teenagers often



produce the opposite result than the parents intended.

So, when adolescents change, why do they? Research indicates that teenagers are more inclined to change their behavior when three conditions are in place. Change tends to occur when:

### **1. The teenager associates the change with something of *intrinsic* value.**

Note the critical word *intrinsic* here. This means that your adolescent responds to an internal, not external, impulse. This is why all of your punitive efforts have failed; they come from *outside* your teenager. Consequently, they have little value to your child, despite what you may think, and are therefore not motivating.

Externally-applied consequences that *do* have intrinsic value to the child can be expected to have a positive result. However, it is difficult for you to know which may and which may not—it is very much a trial-and-error process, with no guarantee that you will stumble on a successful penalty. You've probably selected punishments because they would work on you, but your world view and inner psyche are clearly different from your teenager's.

The key consideration is to discover what is intrinsically valuable to your child, and this discovery will not be accomplished through groundings, denial of privileges, lecturing, hectoring, or any of the other efforts cited above. You must do something different to learn (and help your adolescent learn) what is meaningful to him.



## 2. The teenager is *able, willing, and ready to change.*

This seems too obvious to need to be said, but it is likely central to the frustrations you have been experiencing.

The ideas in this book assume that your child has the intellectual and cognitive *ability* to perform the work. If your child has a significant learning disability or other cognitive impairment, then it is simply unfair to expect her to perform beyond her ability. Likely you have already investigated the existence of learning difficulties but, if not, contact your child's school to begin the process.

The *readiness* and *willingness* components of this second condition of change come down to this simple notion: the change that you desire will not be

*compelled.* You may have been operating under the illusion that you could *make* your teenager do better in school. I hope that your experience over the past months (or years) has led you to abandon this notion.

When you push your adolescent to make a change he is unwilling or unprepared to make, he pushes back. This is to be expected from people of all ages, but from not-yet-mature teens it is virtually guaranteed. What then ensues is the parent/child version of trench warfare during World War I—lots of noise, explosions, and damage, while the front lines remain unmoved.

You might be willing to tolerate this uproar if it produced the change you were seeking, but the irony is that it usually results in no change (at best) or the opposite of what you intended. It is the worst of both worlds—arguments, yelling, recriminations, and



heated unpleasantness *combined with* even worse academic performance.

The lesson to be taken from this research finding is that *change in another will not be forced*, no matter how important it is, how much you wish that it would, or how much sense it makes. So recognize that this is likely what you have been doing and stop it. Read on to discover what to do differently.

### **3. The teenager is in an environment that is marked by *safety, acceptance, and empowerment.***

In Chapter One I presented the notion that motivation is a function of relationship. When reading this third condition for change, substitute the word *relationship* for the word *environment*. Since the primary component of your teen's

environment is her relationship with you, the question for you is this: Is my relationship with my child one that is safe, accepting, and empowering?

What, you may be thinking, makes a relationship safe, accepting, and empowering? Probably the single most important component of such a relationship is that your child can express any thought or emotion to you and you will accept it without evaluation or criticism. And this is an enormous challenge for most parents of teens.

First of all, for these thoughts or emotions to be accepted by the parent they must be expressed in civil terms. Acceptance does not mean that you will tolerate any *behavior* of your child; it simply means that you will not automatically and immediately challenge their *thoughts*. You are happy to discuss



matters with your adolescent, but you have no obligation to tolerate verbal abuse.

What you desire is communication between you and your teenager. Contesting, disputing, debating, and criticizing their point of view kills this communication before it has a chance to flourish. An open, non-judgmental conversation about the issues is a first (and sometimes *only* necessary) step in the motivational process. This is *soooooo* difficult for parents, because you want to teach, to instruct, and to guide. But if your child is not open to your teaching, instruction, or guidance, *they will not hear you*. What might create this openness is their experience of you both listening to them and accepting what they have to say.

One of the rarest of human experiences is to be truly listened to by another person. As rare as this is for

people at large, it is that much more rare for teenage people. And few adolescents have experienced this with adults, who are oh so quick to tell kids what they need to do, thereby inadvertently killing the very motivation they are trying to promote.

Second, a fundamental paradox of human relations is contained in the following saying: *acceptance facilitates change*. If you want someone to change, begin by accepting them precisely as they are. It is this acceptance that frees people to be able to change. Conversely, if you wish someone to continue doing what they are doing, criticize their every effort and condemn their conduct. This is a sure-fire way to guarantee, especially with an adolescent, that their current behavior will continue.

This adage states “acceptance *facilitates* change,” not “acceptance *guarantees* change.” Acceptance is not



the answer or solution in and of itself; rather, it is the necessary underlying component of all the efforts you will be making to motivate your child for academic success.

A difficulty some parents have with this concept is that they believe that acceptance equates with *agreement*. Acceptance does not mean that you agree with your teenager or that you condone his behavior. It simply means that you are withholding judgment and forgoing criticism in the interest of establishing true communication. Useful criticism is indicated when the time is right—we'll talk about when that is later in this book.

## Indecisiveness

A hallmark of the change process is *ambivalence*. Ambivalence is the coexistence of opposing attitudes

or feelings. Ambivalence is a matter of uncertainty, hesitancy, and iffiness.

Since all change has both positive and negative implications, it is very normal for people to both *want to* change and *not want to* change at the same time. What seems to you to be an unequivocally sound course of action is cause for massive mixed feelings for your teenager.

For example, while enhanced academic performance seems to be an unalloyed positive development (improved grades, more privileges, better relationship with parents), this improvement comes at a cost (more time spent studying boring material, less time for fun). The teen may determine that the cost outweighs the potential benefit.



Therefore, it is useful for you to know that kids both *want* and *don't want* to do better in school, at the same time. And they are probably unaware that they are ambivalent about this. Until the indecisiveness is resolved, your child will probably not show much improvement, because they remain undecided about the value of that change.

Sometimes the only requirement for improvement is resolution of the indecisiveness. When this occurs, it is a gorgeous process to witness. Through non-judgmental conversation with a parent, the teenager reflects upon his situation, his goals, and his current sense of satisfaction. As a consequence, one of the more motivational things you can do as a parent is to help your child resolve her ambivalence.



## The Stages of Change

Change is not a *binary* process. It is not that your child is either *for* or *against* change, or *opposed to* or in *favor of* change, or that he *desires* change or *doesn't want* change. It is not an *on/off* or *either/or* proposition. It is more complicated than that. There is interplay among numerous competing thoughts, attitudes, preferences, values, and desires, some stronger than others at any particular moment. Your role in the motivational relationship is to explore these concerns with your adolescent.

But if instead of *exploring* you have been trying to *force* a specific resolution, you are likely reinforcing the unwanted behavior. It is human nature for a person to come down on the other side of the argument someone is making to implore us to change. And this is more so the case when a teenager



feels that his parent is trying to compel a particular course of action.

So, instead of trying to force *your* solution, help your child address and resolve their ambivalence about academic performance. The former is not motivational while the latter has the potential to be.

The change that you desire in your teenager unfolds in phases. The change does not go from *off* to *on*, but rather evolves over time. In his research on the change process, James Prochaska has identified the following five stages of the change:

- 1. Pre-Contemplation**
- 2. Contemplation**
- 3. Preparation**
- 4. Action**
- 5. Maintenance**



Let's examine each stage individually.

## **1. Pre-Contemplation.**

During this stage, your teenager is giving no consideration to change. The idea of changing has not entered his consciousness. He currently sees no advantage of change nor does he see a downside to his current situation.

Trying to force change with a pre-contemplating teenager is futile at best and counter-productive at worst. They will counter your arguments with opposing arguments of their own, offering "Yes, but . . ." responses. I find the most useful thing to do with these kids is ask them questions of the "What If?" variety.

"What would be different if your grades improved?"

"What wouldn't be different?"



“What will happen if things continue in their current direction?”

“How would improved grades change our relationship?”

“How do you expect things will be around home if you don’t improve?”

“What will be different if you do improve?”

“What would your friends think?”

“How would your girl/boy friend respond?”

“Do you think your state of mind would change? How?”

These questions are designed to move your teen from his current pre-contemplation status to that of contemplation. Your role is to prompt his curiosity. It is *not* your role to take a particular position on the questions or his answers. Ask the questions while avoiding commentary on the responses. This is hard but, in your relationship with your teenager,

different. But difference is what is called for because what you have been doing has not worked.

## **2. Contemplation.**

In this stage, your adolescent is beginning to consider the implications of change, both positive and negative. She is starting to think, “Maybe my current situation isn’t so great. Perhaps I could think about doing something different.” When you hear your child think this way, you are encouraged. Don’t allow your encouragement to steer you into the looming trap awaiting you.

Your tendency at this point would be to jump in with both feet with a good bit of “rah-rah.” You might wish to commend her for the maturity of her thinking. You might express your relief that she has finally “come to her senses” and decided to do the



right thing (as defined by you, of course). You may start planning with her the steps she could take to assure her success.

Resist these impulses. At this point, your teenager is merely *considering* change; she has not decided that she will undertake any. Coming on with a lot of “rah-rah” will likely push your child to the other side of the ambivalence scale—it’s just human nature. So how instead should you respond to this contemplation?

Avoid the urge to make a bunch of encouraging statements, commend her for her new-found wisdom, or talk about next steps. Instead, ask her a question for which she is totally unprepared. Throw her off balance while supporting her contemplation by saying:

*“Gee, I don’t know. What do you think about that?”*

This question has two critical components. One is the notion that you, the parent, are not the expert (“I don’t know”). You are not now going to dictate precisely what she needs to do now that she has finally begun to “see the light.” You are not going to lay out a course of action for her to follow or a study plan to adopt. You, at this point, simply “don’t know.”

The second crucial component of this response is that you want to know what she thinks. You are interested in her view of the situation. You have a genuine curiosity regarding her perspective on the issue at hand. And you’re going to shut up, listen, and resist the urge to offer your opinions.



Contained within this response lie the seeds of true motivation. You are not dictating to her but instead eliciting her intrinsic inspiration for change. This is the inside-out phenomenon that is at the core of genuine motivation. And you are responding as someone does as one-half of a motivating relationship.

So encourage rather than shut down contemplation by asking questions instead of making statements. Avoid exuberant cheerleading. Offer no plans or advice. And listen.

### 3. Preparation.

At this stage your child, with your assistance, has worked out most of her ambivalence. She has decided—at least for now—that she will make the necessary changes, or at least begin some of them.

She might have looked into after-school tutoring, or talked with a possible study buddy, or purchased an organizational folder. Preparation has begun.

As with the Contemplation stage, you must avoid suggestions, direction, or guidance (unless requested by your child—more on that later). Continue drawing her out regarding her thoughts on her academics. Inquire, but not too much. Show interest and curiosity, but stop short of interrogation. Let her continue with her preparations without comment or criticism.

**Beware!** Know this: the Contemplation and Preparation stages are the most important phases in the change process. This is also where you are most likely to derail the change that your teen is considering, by falling back on all of the old habits that hadn't worked before. It is exceedingly common



for teens to move back and forth between the Contemplation and the Preparation stage. When this happens—and it inevitably will—view it as a normal part of the change process. Do not think—and certainly don’t say—that it is evidence that she has lost her motivation or is no longer serious about change.

When people change, they don’t move on a straight line from their current status to their new behavior. It rarely occurs immediately, primarily because of ambivalence and the time required to resolve that ambivalence. It is not a “Ready . . . Aim . . . Fire!” proposition. It is more like a “Ready, I’m not sure I’m ready, okay I think I’m ready, let me get a little more ready, okay, aim, aim a little lower, oh, now a little higher, now to the right, I’m not sure I’m on target, I think I’ll go back and get ready a little more . . .” process.



Let your adolescent prepare without commentary, evaluation, or judgment on your part. Your involvement at this point will likely only serve to demotivate her, especially if your previous efforts have produced estrangement between the two of you.

#### **4. Action.**

This stage is marked by actual change in behavior. Your child is now studying, or starting homework, or actually completing homework, or calling friends for assistance, or meeting with teachers for help. She may (again, normally) frighten you by reverting to one of the previous stages, but for the most part she is moving forward.

This is a remarkably gratifying stage for parents. There will be an urge to engage in “rah-rah.” Restrain it. This kind of cheerleading is really about



*you* and your pleasure, when the discussion needs to be about *her*. It's about how pleased *you* are with *her*, rather than how pleased *she* may be with *herself*. Your role is to inquire as to what this success has been like for her—that's all you need to do. And that's a lot.

She will make efforts that are inefficient or misguided. You will want to move in and offer helpful suggestions. But while logical and sensible, they won't work because they are coming from you. Recognize this and avoid this impulse. It is putting your stamp on the efforts which are hers. Allow them to be hers, as illogical as they may be to you.

## 5. Maintenance.

When the change has been maintained for six months, your teenager is in the Maintenance stage.



You, on the other hand, are in Nirvana. Six months of no arguments about school, no ugly scenes, no raised voices, and only the normal disagreements. Congratulations, you have obviously done well in your efforts to motivate your child.

## SUMMARY

Kids tend to be *ambivalent* about change and *indecisive* in its implementation.

Change is a fluid, ongoing *process* rather than an on/off proposition.

Change is more likely to be seen when kids:

- ▶ **Are able, willing, and ready to change**
- ▶ **Connect the change with something of value to them**
- ▶ **Are in a relationship with someone who is safe, accepting, and empowering**



# Chapter Three

## Key Concepts of Motivation

When it comes to motivation, there are no tactics, gimmicks, strategies, or tools. Because, as you learned in Chapter One, motivation is a function of relationship, the key concepts are those of genuineness and sincerity. It is a matter of being with your teenager in an authentic way. You will not deceive, manipulate, or psychologize your child into different behavior. Your teenager will not be tricked into improved performance.

There are, however, approaches you can take that increase the likelihood of success, just as there are approaches that you have taken that have contributed

to failure and frustration. These approaches are as much a matter of mindset as they are conduct, attitude as much as performance. Let's take a look at three of these concepts, pair them with their opposites, and then discuss how to act them out in relationship with your adolescent.

### 1. Cooperation instead of Conflict.

A motivating relationship is a collaborative one, with parent and teen working as partners toward a common goal. It is not an adversarial relationship. If you are punishing, grounding, yelling at, or criticizing your child, then by definition the relationship is not a cooperative one. Rather, it involves you acting as the authority in a one-up relationship with your teen.



There are times when authority is clearly called for from a parent. Some occasions require you to confront your teenager and define and enforce expectations and limits. As essential as this may be at times, it is not motivational. It is plain old-fashioned authority, and it has its place. When it works, it is simple, straightforward, and efficient. But don't confuse it with motivation.

The inherent message in conflict is "I'm right and you're wrong." One member of the relationship attempts to convince the other of the superiority of their point of view and the misguided position of their adversary. In a truly motivating relationship there is no room for persuasion. One does not attempt to convince the other of anything. This mentality on your part has been the major contributor to the arguments that have marked your relationship with your teen around the issue of school

performance. This confrontation is evidence of the lack of collaboration that is the essence of motivation.

## 2. Elicitation instead of Dictation.

I like to describe motivation as an *inside-out* process in contrast to one that is *outside-in*. By this I mean that your role is to elicit your teen's own motivation *from* him, not impose it *upon* him or inject it *into* him. It is not a matter of educating him about his shortcomings or dictating the wisest course of action for him to take.

Over the years of listening to people in both my professional and personal life, I've observed that many people know what *everyone else* needs to do to resolve their problems and improve *their* lives. We are full of advice for others: "Well, all she needs to



do in this situation is \_\_\_\_\_.” Our culture is filled with highly-publicized advice-givers who dispense their wisdom while audiences listen and nod in agreement. What is not seen is whether the recipients actually act on or benefit from this advice. I suspect they don’t.

If simple advice-giving worked, no one would have any problems because there is no shortage of advice in the world. Merely dictating what your teenager needs to do is almost guaranteed to be ineffective if not totally counter-productive. You know that because you’ve already tried it numerous times and seen it fail.

One reason that dictating fails is that it overlooks the individual and personal considerations of the specific person to whom one is dictating. Dictating is a one-size-fits-all formula that cannot take into account

your teen’s issues that, if you’ve been dictating instead of listening, are unknown to you. In contrast, elicitation demands that you know those issues and cannot be done without an increased understanding of what is going on with your teenager.

My father, a member of the Greatest Generation and a man who valued practicality above all, couldn’t believe I could make a living helping people find solutions to life’s problems. “You tell them what they’re doing wrong, you tell them what to do instead, and they do it—how hard can that be? Why would anyone ever meet with you more than once?” But the art of this work is in *joining* people in the sort of relationship that evokes from *them* what *they* want and what *they* are willing to do to get it.

A critical shift in your thinking about your teenager is to move from the question “What is he is motivated



by?” to “What is he motivated for?” If you wish to discover what he is motivated *by*, you will remain in the trap of looking for external inspiration. But if you use your relationship to try to evoke from him what he is motivated *for*, your entire orientation toward him and motivation will change.

### **3. Self-direction instead of Other-direction.**

Remember our discussion regarding why people change? One of the necessary conditions for this change is that one makes a connection between the change and something of intrinsic value. Therefore the goal for you is to help your teenager develop intrinsic motivation. It is not that you coerce a particular course of action, or that you allow or permit certain behavior.

Rather, you acknowledge that change is up to your child—what could be clearer at this point?—and you can facilitate that change by tapping into your child’s goals, beliefs, and values. You will support all of the change that comes from your child, who ultimately is the only author of that change.

### **SUMMARY**

To have a motivating relationship with your teenager, you need to make sure that you:

- ▶ **Are a *cooperative* partner rather than an authoritative adversary**
- ▶ **Evoke your child’s own motivation rather than prod them with yours**
- ▶ **Have the change be directed by *your child* rather than you**



## §Chapter Four

# The Doing of Motivation: Empathy

Thus far our discussion has revolved around the conceptual view of motivation. From this point forward we will focus on practical steps you can take to give life to those conceptual notions. To support cooperation, elicitation, and self-direction (thereby avoiding conflict, dictation, and other-direction), below you will find four fundamental approaches:

### Empathize.

Recall the mantra from Chapter Two: acceptance facilitates change. To accept where your adolescent

is, you must know where she is, and you can't know that without empathizing. There are two types of empathy: affective and cognitive. One is helpful, the other is not.

Affective empathy is all about *feelings*. A synonym for affective empathy is *sympathy*. Sympathy's message is "Oh, your poor dear, that must be awful, how can you possibly stand that, I feel so bad for you." Research indicates that this type of empathy is not helpful in assisting people toward change. Its more likely result is to hinder it.

Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, is about *facts*. When you are cognitively empathic with your child, the message is "So this is the way it is for you, this is your current experience, this is how you see it." It is difficult to overestimate the power of cognitive empathy in the motivation process.



Cognitive empathy requires the crucial skill of listening. Listening without commentary, listening without judgment, listening without advice. Simply listen to what your teen has to say and then, when you *do* talk, merely summarize what you have heard. Don't add your thoughts—have it be all about their thoughts, perspectives, and points of view.

When you do this, two things happen that change the dynamic between you and your child: she may feel understood by you for the first time regarding school, and she has not been other-directed by you. This is so different from the usual dance you have done together that it is change-producing all by itself. To have a silent parent understand and accept her point of view is revolutionary.

This manner of empathizing is technically simple but practically difficult. It requires you to restrain your

notion that you are agreeing with or condoning his perspective. It asks that you withhold judgment and advice when you hear him say things that reflect his not-yet-mature world view. You may damage some internal organs in the process of holding back. But little of a motivational nature will happen in the absence of empathy.

For example, your daughter, who is struggling with geometry, says, “My geometry teacher hates me.” As the parent, you understand that it is highly unlikely that the teacher hates your daughter. Thus, you are likely to reply to her statement in keeping with that thought, something like “Your geometry teacher doesn't hate you” or “Why in the world would your teacher possibly hate you?” or “Maybe if you did better in her class she would like you.” None of these replies is cognitively empathic, and all of them



close the communication process before it has a chance to get off the ground.

A more useful response would be something like this:

“Gee, what makes you think your teacher hates you?”

This reply demonstrates that you’re listening and you see her view as valid even as you don’t believe it to be the case. You haven’t blown her out of the proverbial water by rejecting her opinion, nor have you agreed with her that her teacher hates her. Your message is “I hear you, I’m with you, let me do my best to understand you so we can take it from here.”

Ask her how she feels and what she thinks about her current situation rather than telling her how she *should* think or feel. One of the most useful questions that I ask people considering change is “Is

there anything about your current situation that has you concerned?” Other effective questions include: “Do you see any advantages of changing?” And “Do you ever find yourself unhappy about your current situation?” And “As you change X, what else do you think will be different?” As she answers, listen, listen, listen, and avoid the urge to comment.

A rule of thumb regarding human nature is that no one will hear you until they first feel heard themselves. You may have some useful advice for your adolescent, but she will not hear your advice unless and until she believes that you have heard and understood her (and, given the nature of adolescence, perhaps not even then). So the first essential step in the motivational process is to listen without prejudice. And if you *are* pre-judging, keep your judgments to yourself.



## SUMMARY

The fundamental skill of motivation is *empathy*.

Make sure your empathy is of the *cognitive*, not empathic, variety.

Paradoxically, it is the *acceptance* of your teenager where they are that frees them to change.



## §Chapter Five§

# The Doing of Motivation: Goals

All of the literature about motivation cites the important nature of goals. If one is to be motivated, one needs to be motivated *toward* something, in the direction of a known and particular outcome. Remember our definition of motivation: change-oriented *movement*.

It is my belief that the most important question (short of spiritual ones that I am not equipped to address) that anyone can ask themselves is “What do I want?” This question gets at one’s values, beliefs, preferences, and goals. It sets the stage for you to



help your teenager reflect upon whether their conduct is supportive of or inconsistent with their goals—do the lyrics match the music.

Therefore, the most critical questions you can pose to your teenagers regarding school are in service of helping them understand and clarify what they want from themselves. Specific questions include but are not limited to:

“Do you want to graduate?”

“Do you want to be on the Honor Roll?”

“Do you want to go to college?”

“Do you want passing grades?”

“Do you want to be the kind of student who completes homework?”

The objective is for your child to state his goal rather than you stating what his goal should be. For your

motivational efforts to be effective, the child must be motivated by *his* goals, not yours. If yours and his are identical, that's great—but avoid the trap of reverting to pushing your goals on him.

Once people have resolved their ambivalence about change they sometimes compromise their chances of success by poorly defining their goals. Well-defined goals are essential to the person doing the changing, but they are just as important for the other person in the motivating relationship (in this case, you).

Let me give you an example of a poorly-defined goal: *“I will be on the honor roll at the end of the semester.”* This goal, while laudable on its face, is actually likely to *discourage* rather than encourage change. Let's look at why, as well as how to set goals that lead to change.



## Process vs. Outcome.

The biggest drawback with the above goal, the factor which makes it discouraging, is that it can't be accomplished tomorrow, or next week, or next month. Each day one is reminded that the goal remains unaccomplished. When our goals go unmet, our motivation flags.

Similarly, when your teen sets a goal such as *“I will have all B's on my next report card,”* the outcome, and therefore feedback on his progress, is weeks away. While having all B's may well be desirable, it is not the sort of goal that lends itself to the frequent evaluation of progress that is crucial to motivation.

So while the outcome goal may be “no grade lower than a B,” the process goals are comprised of all of the daily (or even hourly) behaviors that will bring that outcome to fruition. Your teenager can know



daily (or perhaps hourly) whether she is doing what is required for goal completion.

When the ultimate goal is broken down into the pieces that can be achieved daily, progress can more easily be measured and a motivating sense of accomplishment felt by your teen. If the process goal is “I will complete all my homework today,” your child can meet that goal daily rather than waiting to see the report card at the end of the term.

There is nothing wrong with a goal like “I want to be a pediatrician” or “I want to go to an Ivy League school” so long as your teen’s behavior is consistent with that goal. That sort of goal can be the overarching objective toward which day-to-day behaviors are directed. But in striving for that ultimate goal, help them keep their eye on the process goals that they will need to meet between here and there.



## **Precise and Behavioral.**

Since the accomplishment of goals is motivating, it is beneficial to *know* that they have been accomplished. Thus it is essential that the goal be stated in a manner that your teen knows that it has been reached. This means that the goal needs to be defined with precision. Ask your child “What will you be doing, or what will you have done, that will tell you that progress has been made?” Therefore, “I will be working harder” or “I will study more” or “My grades will be better” are goals that don’t meet the test of behavioral precision.

Help your adolescent develop a clear definition of his goals. School attendance, homework completion, and participation in after-school tutoring are all precisely-stated goals; he and you can know whether or not they have been met. You can argue about



whether he is working hard (“I’m working hard.” “No, you’re not.” “Yes, I am.” “No, you’re not . . .” is a pretty futile argument to have), but homework submission is an objective event easily enough determined.

### **Short v. long term.**

As the old saying goes, “Nothing succeeds like success.” Contained within this old adage is the kernel of truth that it is more motivating to have a number of successes than one big eventual achievement. Short-term goals are easier to accomplish and provide more immediate and frequent motivation than long-term ones.

So when discussing academic goals with your teenager, avoid the trap of talking about grades and instead focus on the daily efforts that he can make

that will produce the desired grades. Looking long-term can be discouraging and eventually overwhelming. But looking at what task is in front of us one day at a time (which is really the only way we can do *anything*) avoids that sense of being overwhelmed and feeds motivation.

Therefore, it is useful for the goal to be the . . .

### **Start, not end, of a behavior.**

Every five years I paint my house. This is not a task that I relish. There is nothing about painting that I enjoy. I have a lot of ambivalence but little motivation, intrinsic or otherwise, to do this job. But I’ve noticed this fact: once I start, I work at it methodically until I finish. As soon as I lay the first brush stroke of paint on the wood, some manner of motivation, which feels to me like momentum, takes



over. I've always completed the task. And I always have a sense of satisfaction once the house is painted.

The story is told about Dorothy Parker, the writer, who was approached by a fan who said, "Oh, Miss Parker, writing must be wonderful," to which Dorothy is reputed to have replied, "Writing is hell—*having written* is wonderful." The film director Woody Allen is quoted as saying, "Ninety percent of life is just showing up."

Each of these examples from successful people highlights the value of *starting*. Simply lifting a pencil or opening a book can be the act that starts your adolescent on the process of reaching her goal for that day, or evening, or hour. Those actions can amount to the toppling of that first domino that eventually produces the desired result. Logically, nothing can be finished until it is started, so there is



little point in focusing on the end. Therefore, helping your child focus on beginning can jump-start the process that culminates in goal achievement. While *finishing* can appear daunting, *starting* is eminently doable

### **Watch your language.**

In helping your child craft goals, pay particular attention to the language that is used by both you and him. Words are powerful—the right ones can jump-start and maintain change, while the wrong ones chosen carelessly can derail the change process.

**Presumptive language.** Use language that presumes that the desired change will occur. For example, saying:

“*When* you do your homework . . .”

is preferable to



“If you do your homework . . .”

Similarly:

“When *will* you notice a change . . . ?”

is better than

“When *might* you notice a change . . . ?”

And:

“*Once* you decide . . .”

is better than

“*If* you decide . . .”

In each example cited above, the first statement presumes the change will occur while the second doesn't contain that presumption.

The use of presumptive language is a way for you to, in effect, pre-program change for your child. It sets their eyes on the future in an affirmative way rather than a conditional way. In this fashion, you are



increasing the likelihood that the change being discussed will occur.

### **Discourage trying and hoping.**

Encourage your child to avoid the words *try* and *hope*. “I will try to get my homework done” is a lousy goal because one can try and still do no homework. So if the goal were to *try*, the mission was accomplished; but if the goal were to complete homework, the child may have failed. Suggest he say “I will” rather than “I’ll try.” *Trying* is the great human escape hatch; it absolves us of responsibility for failure (“Well, I *tried* to get my homework done, but my friends kept texting me.”).

The same holds true for *hope*. Whenever one of my clients says “I’ll try” or “I hope to” or “Hopefully,” I know they will not succeed if they don't change their



language. Hope is a great human virtue and can be part of a successful change effort, but all by itself it accomplishes nothing. The old adage “Hope in one hand, spit in the other, and see which one fills up first” is testimony to the fact that only behavioral action produces visible change.

In your role as the parent attempting to elicit motivation from your child, the creation of well-defined goals is the cornerstone of all of your efforts. It lays the foundation for the other efforts, described below, that you will make in the name of motivation.

## SUMMARY

Goals are critical to the motivation and change process. To be useful, goals should:

- ▶ **Be focused on *process***
- ▶ **Be precise**

- ▶ **Be focused on the *near future***
- ▶ **Be the *start of something***
- ▶ **Use language that presumes that the desired change will occur.**



## §Chapter Six§

# The Doing of Motivation: Exploring Discrepancy

Once your child has, with your assistance, developed some well-defined goals for academic performance, you are now well-positioned to assist her in meeting those goals. One of the best ways to do this is to explore with her the inconsistencies between her stated goals and her current behavior.

For example, if your child's goal is to have no grades lower than a C but she is submitting little homework, there exists a clear discrepancy between her stated



future goal and her current performance. Exploring this discrepancy with her is one of the primary tools you have in your motivational toolkit. *How* you go about exploring this is crucial to whether your efforts are motivational or discouraging.

Likely, the manner in which you have explored this thus far has not been useful. It was probably *your* goal that you were wishing she would pursue, and your efforts probably took the form discussed in Chapter One, marked by much exasperation and negative emotion.

Also, more than likely you have made statements about her, her efforts, and, by implication, her character. In this approach, rather than making declarations, you will be asking questions.

## Good Questioning.

The quality of these questions is crucial. They are not to be in the manner of an interrogation. They are not to be statements disguised as questions (“How do you ever expect to get better grades when you are so lazy and irresponsible?” Or “What in the world is the matter with you?” Or “When are you going to get it into your head that you have to take school seriously?”). They are instead questions that reflect genuine curiosity on your part asked in a quiet, unemotional, respectful tone.

When I am pursuing discrepancy with my teen-age clients, I find myself channeling the actor Peter Falk playing his classic character on the 1970’s television show *Columbo*. Detective Columbo always appeared a bit befuddled and confused by the actions of the suspect. He came across as a good-natured bumbler,



all the while being five steps head of the suspect, the police, and everyone else involved in the case. His manner was gentle and respectful.

Detective Columbo is a good model for the motivational approach you will use when discussing inconsistencies with your teen. Your stance will be one of curiosity, uncertainty, and perhaps a bit of confusion. You are never attacking, judging, reprimanding, or condemning. You’re merely pointing out inconsistencies between your adolescent’s goal and his current behavior.

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**Daniel was in the second semester of his junior year of high school. He was a bright and inquisitive young man who, despite his raw intelligence, carried a D+ average. He readily described himself as a lazy student. His parents were beside themselves with frustration as they**



watched his lackluster academic performance fall so short of his potential.

When my work began with Daniel, he was certain of his goal: he wanted to be an anesthesiologist. Clearly, there was a discrepancy between his goal and his conduct, a discrepancy frequently and emotionally pointed out to him by his parents. I started by suggesting that they say little to him about school, and I began to gently and respectfully explore this discrepancy with him. Here are some of the questions I used in this exploration:

“What are your thoughts about your school performance as it now stands?”

“Is there anything about your current performance in school that concerns you?”

“What makes you think you might need to change?”

“How has your current academic situation caused you problems?”



“If you were to decide not to change things regarding school, what would happen?”

“What would, for you, be the upside of doing better?”

“If you decide to change, what makes you think you could?”

“What does it take in the way of education to be an anesthesiologist?”

“What are the requirements to get into college?”

“Are you currently meeting those requirements?”

“What are doing or not doing that is preventing you from meeting those requirements?”

“How easy is it to get into medical school?”

“Do you have a plan to improve your performance?”

“Are you currently using your plan or are you waiting to put it into practice?”

“How will you know when the time is right to work your plan?”

“Is there a time when it would be too late?”

“Is there a time when you might have to decide to change your goal?” What would tell you that?”



**“Do you want to be an anesthesiologist enough to do what is necessary or would you prefer that it fell out of the sky into your lap?”**

**“You mentioned that you want to go to college and that you need to improve your grades to do so, yet you did no homework last week. Can you explain that disconnect?”**

**“Do you feel as though you are on track toward your goal?”**

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Like Detective Columbo, I knew the answers to many of the above questions, but I wanted Daniel to tell *me* the answers. He had been accustomed to hearing adults tell him what the answers need to be, to push him to change, but I wanted *him to make the case for change*. Herein lies a key shift for you to make: instead of making the argument for change *to* your teenager, ask questions which result in *him* making that argument.



These questions are asked in a calm, non-judgmental manner. You genuinely want to hear *your child’s* answer rather than hearing the answer *that you wish to hear*. Your goal, rather than telling him what to think about these matters, is to get him to develop his own thoughts. Exploring the disparity between his stated goal and what he is actually doing prompts him to evaluate his performance relative to that goal. In light of this examination he may decide that he needs to alter his performance or, alternatively, his goal.

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**Lucas was a junior in high school. Whatever success he had at this point in his academic career—and he had little—was the result of incessant efforts by his mother, Monica, who essentially managed all of his school-related efforts while he was home and some of them while he attended school. She oversaw his work load, prodded him to**



complete assignments, and logged on daily to the school's web site to check his academic progress.

Though Lucas had a documented learning disability, the primary impediments to his success in school were his work habits. While his mother's were excellent, his ranged from poor to absent. Everything he did regarding school was done only at the prompting of Monica, whether that was simply rising in the morning to attend school, doing homework, or completing projects.

Monica received frequent phone calls from Lucas' guidance counselor reminding her of his precarious academic situation and the high likelihood that he would not graduate from high school if he remained on his current path. His cumulative grade average was barely above a D and was threatening to fall further.

When I first met with Lucas, I inquired about his goals. He reported that he wanted to attend the nearby state university and become a veterinarian.



I was aware, as was he, that the admission requirement for the university was a GPA of 3.30 and the standard for the very competitive veterinary program was considerably higher. There was a clear discrepancy between his stated goal and both his past and current performance.

I then began to focus on the disparity between his goal and his conduct, which was clearly huge. My questions were asked genuinely and with authentic curiosity. Along with our discussions about this issue, I also showed interest in the non-academic aspects of his life. Among his interests was his job at a local restaurant where he was a valued employee. He had begun as a bus boy and, because his work ethic on the job was so much better than at school, he served as a waiter and even got to do some cooking.

Initially, like many adolescents, he insisted that he would be successful academically. However, between our sessions he began to do some serious reflection on his current situation, likely prodded



by our conversations. By our fourth session, he declared that he was no longer interested in becoming a veterinarian or even attending a four-year university. He noted that he had come to dislike school intensely and that the prospect of at least four additional years of that discomfort had limited appeal.

As a consequence of his re-evaluation, he decided that he wanted to pursue the culinary program at the local community college. He pursued this interest in high school, and once he began taking culinary classes in high school his grade point average improved enough that he graduated. He went on to earn an associate's degree in culinary arts and get a job as a sous chef at a four-star hotel.

My focus on discrepancy did not motivate him to perform better academically. But it was part of a process that led him to stop deluding himself about his goals. It helped him to clarify his values and lead him to a more satisfying course of study and eventual career.



Monica had to relinquish her dream of her son as a four-year college graduate. Once she became aware that that was *her* goal for him, not his, it became easier for her to do so. She is now proud of her son's accomplishments, and their relationship has become a very satisfying one, since the struggle that had for so long defined them has ended.



This exploration of discrepancy is the most effective tool you have available to you in motivating your teen. Use it deftly but genuinely, without judgment or sarcasm, to help your adolescent decide what he wishes to do.

## SUMMARY

The pursuit and exploration of the *discrepancy* between your teenager's stated goal and actual performance should be your conversational focus.



Ask questions—*good questions*—of your teenager rather than make declarative statements about him or the situation.



# Chapter Seven

## The Doing of Motivation: Disarming Resistance

When doing a presentation for parents of teenagers, I commonly ask:

“How many of you would describe your child as argumentative?”

Invariably, almost every audience member raises a hand. Parents view their teens’ willingness to argue as evidence of their resistance to a better way of understanding and/or doing things.



When I go on to ask, “What is your child resistant to?” the answers are illuminating. “Change” is a common response, along with “Common sense” or “Success.” But the answer is simpler than that. What your teen is resistant to, dear parent, is *you*.

Your teen is resistant to your advice, your counsel, your guidance, your lectures, your wisdom, your logic, and your characterization of him. How dare he!!!! Where does he get the audacity to resist your omniscience? Does he not understand that if he would simply see the unassailable brilliance of your insight that all would be well in his world?

The most important fact regarding the concept of resistance is that resistance is not a characteristic of an individual but of a *relationship*. A person cannot, all by herself, be resistant. But that person can be a member of a resistant relationship.



The key understanding is for you to make sure that, when it comes to motivation, you do not create a resistant relationship with your child. The good news is that you are able to, without the cooperation of your child, prevent that from happening. To know how, it is useful to understand some critical notions regarding what we have come to call resistance.

### **Advice.**

When are you open to accepting the advice of another? The answer is simple and universal: when it is requested. Few of us are open to unsolicited advice. In fact, we typically reject it. We accept the counsel of others only when we ask for it or, in the absence of requesting it, truly desire it. This normal human tendency is amplified with teenagers. They are unlikely to accept and act upon advice they have

not requested regarding a goal about which they are ambivalent.

When my computer breaks down, I call the help line for assistance and I will then do whatever I am told to do in order to fix the problem. Why? Because I am actively and independently seeking their expertise *and* I have zero ambivalence about the goal. This set of circumstances—proactive advice-seeking plus an absence of ambivalence—seldom describes the unmotivated adolescent student.

If your child were to come to you and ask, “How can I do better in school?” you would be filled with excellent counsel that would be willingly ladled out in large quantities. And because it was requested it would perhaps be accepted and put into practice. But in the absence of that request, your efforts would be futile at best and counter-productive at worst,



likely to result in your sense that your child is resistant. And when we view our children as resistant, we try to break down that wall of resistance by battering away at it with logic offered in the form of advice. It is this very process which produces the very resistance we hope to avoid along with arguments that are so unpleasant.

## Arguing.

The argumentative adolescent is the simplest of all parent-child problems to solve. As with resistance, the solution requires nothing from your child and can be solved by you alone. Let's examine the dynamics of arguing.

An argument has three requirements: a *topic*; an *arguer* (your child); and an *arguee* (you). In the absence of any of these three components there will

not be an argument. The topic (academic performance) is ever-present, and your adolescent is always prepared to assume the role of arguer. But if you decline to step into the role of arguee—that is, if you simply refuse to argue—there can by definition be no argument.

Your silence guarantees there will be no arguing. It does not, however, insure the silence of your teenager, who may spew unilaterally even though you are not returning fire. But there cannot be an argument if you decline to participate. This refusal eliminates the usual dynamic of ever-escalating verbiage and emotion that produces nothing but bad feelings.

*I never see any reason to argue with children. It is as though parents who insist on arguing expect that, in the midst of the argument, your child will suddenly*

say, “Gosh, Mom, I’ve just realized that I have never seen things that way before. Your explanation of this issue is so clear and logical, it has changed my mind. I will now adopt your position on this matter, abandon mine, and do just as you have suggested.” If you reflect on this, you will come to see that your child has never, ever, *not once*, responded this way.

If you so choose, you can never argue with your teenager again—never. The choice is entirely yours. And since it is so futile, so ineffective, so frustrating, and so little fun, why would you?

### **Convincing.**

There is no reason for doing well in school of which your kids are unaware. They *know* things will be better for them if they do well. They *know* that good academic performance improves their chances for a

successful future. It’s not a lack of information that’s holding them back.

Yet you argue with your kids, whom you have heretofore seen as resistant, in order to convince them of the correctness of your point of view. You try to “get it through their heads” or “get them to understand” why their behavior is so wrong-headed and your course of action is the preferred one.

I have news for you: it’s already in their heads. They already understand it. It may even make sense to them. The problem is not a lack of understanding—it’s a lack of effective action (i.e., goal-oriented change). They are not acting because they are ambivalent, or they are not yet in the action stage of change. It’s not time to try to force a particular outcome that makes sense to you. Instead, it’s time



to empathize, understand, set goals, and explore discrepancy.

What follows is a case example which, while not dealing with academic issues, illustrates the concepts we have been discussing.

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**When Rachel entered my office with her parents, the reason they had decided to consult with me was immediately evident. An attractive 18-year-old high school senior, she displayed on the side of her face a large and magnificently-colored bruise placed there by her boyfriend of three years.**

**Her parents were heartsick and frantic. This was not the first time that her boyfriend had struck Rachel. They pleaded with her to break up with him. They could not understand why their attractive daughter, a girl who would have no problem attracting suitors, would remain in an abusive relationship. It was clear that no one—not**

**her parents or her friends—believed that Rachel should stay with him. Yet she did.**

**The agenda of her parents was clear—they wanted me to convince Rachel to end the relationship. Within five minutes of meeting her, I wanted her to break up with him. But I know that if mine were merely one more voice in the choir of all of those who had attempted to persuade her to do so, I would fail. If people who loved her had not been successful, a man whom she had just met would be even less so.**

**I excused her parents to my waiting room to talk with Rachel alone. I began the conversation with some certain assumptions. First, I assumed that she was ambivalent about the relationship, that she both wanted to be with him and break up with him at the same time. I also assumed that if I pushed her to break up with him she would more strongly argue to stay with him. I further assumed that if I led the discussion well, she would make the argument for change.**



Knowing that she had likely heard numerous reasons for leaving him, I decided she wouldn't hear any from me that she had not previously considered. I therefore began our conversation in a different direction. I asked her, "You have been with Brian for three years now. You are a sharp and mature young lady. Therefore I know that he has some positive qualities. What are they?"

She appeared mildly startled by my question, as though she expected me to be one more middle-aged person who would launch into a diatribe explaining why she should end the relationship. She soon began listing some of his positive attributes, of which he had a number. As she finished, she said the word that was music to my ears. She said,

*"... But . . . . . No girl should have to tolerate being abused by her boyfriend."*

This statement indicated the depth of her ambivalence. It showed that she was considering,

because she had been given the space to, the other side of the argument. Instead of the grown-up telling her what to do, she was now making the case for change, rather than it being made for her. She was in the Contemplation Stage of the change process.

I next explored her ambivalence about the relationship and empathized with her point of view. I never took a stance one way or another. She didn't ask for advice and I offered none. She, with obvious mixed feelings, presented reasons for leaving Brian, and I provided only cognitive empathy. As the conversation neared its end, she offered some goals—clear, behavioral, and short-term—that she would pursue until our next meeting. She would not call him, return his phone calls, nor read any of his emails—her goals, not mine for her.

She had moved through the Contemplation and Preparation Stages and felt prepared to begin Action. When she returned for our next meeting,



she was upset with herself because, in her view, she had failed. She had “weakened” and taken a phone call from Brian, an action which fueled her ambivalence about him. I explored the discrepancy between her goals and her performance and empathized with her circumstance. However, in the calm and non-judgmental safety of my office, her resolve returned and she pledged to stick to her goals.

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Which she did. Her ambivalence resolving, she remained in Action mode. She then, for the first time, asked my advice. She requested language from me that she might use to be firm and clear with Brian that their relationship was over. I provide her that language, she utilized it, and she successfully ended their relationship.



During the entire series of conversations, I made no attempt to argue for change. I tried to convince her of nothing. I never countered that part of her ambivalence that urged her to stay with Brian. I never presented a point of view. When she wavered from her goals, I merely pointed out the discrepancy.

When you argue vigorously for change with your teen, the very human response is to argue why that change is not necessary (“Yes, but . . .”). The need to strike a balance means that your *push* will be met with her *push back*. This is what usually happens when you view your teen as resistant.

But if you restrain the urge to argue for a particular position, there is then nothing for her to push back against. If you merely offer empathy, focus on her stated goals, point out any discrepancy, and pursue it with her, there can be no resistance. In doing so, you

are emphasizing her autonomy. She is the decision-maker. The goals are hers, not yours. Resistance vanishes.

### **Summary.**

To have a motivating relationship with your teenager, you will no longer attempt to advise, persuade, convince, or argue with her. You will decline to be the source of all wisdom regarding academic success. You will abandon efforts aimed at enticing or encouraging different school-related behaviors by offering rewards or threatening punishments.

Instead, you will help your child be clear about her goals. You will listen empathically to her concerns, withholding judgment. You will pursue the discrepancies you hear and see between her stated goals and her performance. In doing this, you will

make all resistance vanish. And you *may* just transform your relationship with your teenager.

*Resistance* is a function of your relationship with your child, not her personal characteristic.

Your *stance* toward your teenager and the subject matter at hand can eliminate resistance.

Refuse to *argue*.

Offer no *advice*.

Make no attempts at *persuasion*.



## §Chapter Eight§

# When All Else Fails . . .

As is sometimes the case with efforts that involve human beings, you can do everything right and still not achieve the outcome that you had hoped for. You could follow the advice you have read in this book and your child could continue to decide to do poorly in school.

If you have reached this point, I suggest a change of direction. (Remember, if what you are doing is not working, even if recommended in this book, you need to do something different.) I suggest, as outlined below, the communication of a heartfelt, genuine message to your teen about her academics, your interaction, and your wishes for a change in your



relationship. Begin by making some manner of the following statement to your child:

“I love you more than I can possibly express or you could, at this stage in your life, conceivably understand. My love for you has led me to do whatever I could to assure your academic success, because I know how important it is to your future. I have nagged, lectured, yelled, pleaded, punished, and nagged some more because I have *so much* wanted you to be successful.

“I’ve come to realize that, not only have my well-intentioned efforts not worked, they have gotten in your way. And they have certainly contaminated our relationship. All we ever talk about is school, and most of those conversations are unpleasant. This must have been as dreadful for you as it has been for

me. I'm sorry for the role I have played in bringing about this circumstance.

"It's not that I believe that school is no longer important, or that I no longer care. It's just that I've finally come to realize that it's your decision and your life, and that I can do nothing to change things."

"So, therefore, I've made the following decision: I will no longer bother you about school. I will not ask about homework, or what tests you have coming up, or whether you're studying, or what your grades are.

"If you continue to fail, I will be heartsick and beside myself with worry. But I've decided not to make a bad situation even worse by adding a lousy relationship between us on top of your poor academics.



"If I were you, I wouldn't believe a word of this, both because of my history and because you think I'm incapable of being quiet about school. Sometimes I'm not sure myself that I can do it. If I slip back into old habits, I expect you to remind me of the promise I'm making to you today. But this is my pledge to you: I love you too much to allow what has been happening between us to continue to happen."

And then honor your promise by saying nothing about school.

The next evening, when your son is doing no homework and you would normally be inquiring about school-related matters, say this instead:

"Hey, let's watch a movie (or get a pizza, or play cards)."



Focus on the part of your relationship that has nothing to do with school. Actively demonstrate that, not only are you *not* going to discuss school, you are going to cautiously pursue that aspect of your relationship that has been too long neglected, held hostage by academic matters.

Your child will be perplexed by the New You. He will watch you warily, expecting you to regress to your previous way of conducting yourself. He will be waiting for the dropping of the other shoe—it is your job to make sure that it doesn't drop.

Here is a dynamic that sometimes results from this approach: the child does no work on the first day, or the second, or the third. He looks to see if the parent keeps his promise, and is surprised at the parent's silence. He then makes some minimal effort in the direction of improved academics.

If the parent remains silent and refrains from acknowledging this effort, it continues. When the child speaks of school in any fashion and the parent responds casually, with interest but no enthusiasm, the effort also continues. But if the parent responds with compliments, or clear pleasure, or any fashion of “rah-rah,” the effort typically flags.

Say nothing if your child does poorly or if he does better. If improvement is seen, resist the urge to compliment your teen.

And then your teen, feeling liberated from the oppressive tactics of his parents, starts to do a little work of his own accord. It is now something that he can put his personal stamp on, instead of having to merely knuckle under to your command. He keeps his antennae tuned to any hint of intervention from his parents and, sensing none, continues his progress



on a hit-and-miss, three-steps-forward, two-steps-back basis.

By relating to the child in this fashion, you have successfully altered the circular *push/push back* pattern that has marked the interaction around academics. By doing something different, you have become a new person for your child to respond to. In the process, because you are presenting an entirely new set of behaviors, your teen's behavior will change in reaction to you.

### **Finally . . .**

A central message of this book is that while you can *encourage, advise, direct, suggest, recommend*, or attempt to *persuade* your children, you cannot *make* them do anything. And in attempting to make them understand, accept, or do something in particular,

you might find that you are guaranteeing the opposite result of that which you had intended. Such is often the case when dealing with the raw materials of human behavior and emotion.

If you are frustrated with your child and disappointed with the results of your efforts, know this: Your adolescent is his or her own person. While you have a good deal of influence over your children, you have come to discover that your influence is not *total*. Your children are not *only* the reflection of your efforts. They bring a host of other variables to the mix that make them who they are: temperament, disposition, DNA, birth order, friends, intelligence of all sorts, interests, preferences, values, and free will, just to highlight a few.

When our children disappoint us or fall short of our hopes for them, an automatic tendency is to blame



ourselves. Avoid this parental trap. The mere fact that you have read this book is testimony to your willingness to do what you can to improve your child's life. Do all that you know to do and, once done, give yourself the luxury of being a human being, with all of your failings, foibles, and flaws. Take consolation in the fact that you are likely a *plenty good* parent, even though you fall short of perfection. Like the rest of us—join the club.

