

Batteries NOT Included "I can't" vs. "He won't"

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Motivational Issues in Education

Social workers often refer to a concept called "blaming the victim." This refers to society's tendency to believe that every human being has **free will** and, as a result, has complete control over his own fate and behavior. Therefore, we mistakenly believe that our fellow citizens who are homeless, obese, drug addicted, delinquent, etc. are doing so **by their own choice**. Further, they could stop their self-destructive behavior by investing time and energy into self-improvement. This judgmental (and inaccurate!) belief system ignores the physiological causal factors that contribute to these conditions. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the condition is beyond the person's control. It is insensitive and counterproductive, therefore, to "blame the victim" for the condition that greatly compromises his lifestyle.

Children with learning problems are often accused of creating their own problems; or, at least, accused of limiting their own progress by failing to commit their fullest efforts to their schoolwork, homework, etc.

How often are these kids accused of being lazy? Disinterested? Unmotivated? How often do they hear the mantra, "If you'd only try harder, you would do better!" These statements are classic examples of the "blaming the victim" mindset.

Student motivation has always been an interesting topic for me. As I have traveled the country and explored this issue with thousands of teachers and parents, I have learned that motivation is greatly misunderstood by America's caregivers. The "Batteries" workshop is designed to demystify the complex concept of motivation and provide dozens of specific suggestions to improve and enhance the motivation of children with special needs.

The workshop begins with an exploration of the six most common **myths** about motivation. As I prepared this seminar in 1999 I interviewed dozens of teachers and parents in order to rate their understanding of motivation. These interviews steeled my belief that significant (and damaging!) misconceptions exist among the adults who guide the lives of these children.

Primary among these misconceptions is the oft-repeated charge that "**nothing** motivates that kid! He's **never** motivated!" This statement reflects a troubling lack of information related to the **nature** of motivation. You see, **all** human behavior is motivated. With the exception on involuntary anatomical processes (eg., heart beating, blood flowing through the circulatory system, breathing in and out, etc.), **every** human behavior is motivated. If you, (as the reader of this article) were to stop reading at this point it would be inaccurate to say, "You're not motivated!" **You were motivated to stop reading the article!!**

We need to understand and embrace this concept. For example, I once worked with a child who – everyday – would force his fingers down his throat prior to his daily reading class. He would vomit and would, of course, be excused from that day's session. His teacher told me that the child, obviously, was "not motivated to improve his reading!"

Au contraire! That kid **was** motivated. In fact, he was **super**-motivated. But his **primary** motivator was the avoidance of the pain and embarrassment of stumbling through his daily oral reading session in front of his smirking, giggling classmates. This kid didn't have a lack of motivation. He had a lack of success! Imagine how much motivation it takes to deal with a daily bout of self-imposed vomiting!

It was inaccurate to say that the boy was not motivated. Rather, he was not motivated to do **what the teacher wanted him to do** (attend the reading class). Our goal must be to **re-direct** that motivation to the area that **we** view as primary.

Among the other motivation myths that we will explore are:

- Using rewards to motivate kids
- The impact of LD on the child's motivation
- Learned helplessness vs. laziness
- The overuse of competition as a motivator
- Ineffective attempts to "make learning fun"
- Performance inconsistency

We will also be discussing the impact that primary needs (eg., hunger, thirst, elimination of waste, etc.) have upon a child's level of motivation. It is very difficult to remain focused, attentive and motivated when you are hungry, tired, frightened, thirsty, or stressed out. All of these "feeling states" have a significant impact upon a child's ability to maintain his motivation. Many of today's school children are experiencing a lack of several of these primary needs **simultaneously**. It is small wonder that they cannot maintain a consistent level of motivation.

One of the most important topics to be covered in the workshop is the issue of performance inconsistency. The daily performance and productivity of these kids tend to inexplicably vary from day to day. A child, for example, may be able to understand the concept of "noun/verb agreement" on Tuesday only to completely forget the concept of Wednesday. This inconsistency is extraordinarily puzzling and frustrating for teachers. Try to imagine how frustrating it is for the child!

Columbia University's Dr. Jonathan Cohen interviewed hundreds of adolescents with LD who were also suffering from depression. He asked the students to cite one symptom of their LD, which troubled them the most. A majority of students identified "performance inconsistency" as their chief nemesis. One child stated, "I hate the fact that the problem comes - and - goes. Some days I'm hot, other days I'm not. When I can't do the work, the teacher says that I'm not trying. It's **so** frustrating!" You bet!

Much has been learned about motivation in recent years. The more we learn about this complex process, the better we will become at assisting children in enhancing and maintaining their motivation. We must come to understand that "one size does **not** fit all" when it comes to motivation. There are, basically, eight things that motivate people. Each person has his or her own unique pattern of motivators. As teachers and parents we must identify each child's individual motivation profile and utilize this knowledge at home and in the classroom. Lee Canter has identified the eight motivators that impact upon the performance of students. They include:

- Status** - the need to be important
- Inquisitiveness** - the need to gain knowledge
- Affiliation** - the need to associate
- Power** - the need for authority
- Aggression** - the need to assert
- Autonomy** - the need for independence
- Achievement** - the need for recognition
- Gregariousness** - the need to belong

Each student has a unique pattern of motivators as do you as their teacher. We often make the mistake of attempting to motivate a child by using **our** pattern of motivators instead of utilizing **his** pattern. For example, suppose I am a teacher who is highly motivated by autonomy. I enjoy working **alone** on projects. My student, Russ, is motivated by gregariousness he enjoys working in groups as a part of a team. In a well-intentioned effort to motivate him, I instruct him to go to the Media Center to do some independent research. Now I would **really** enjoy that assignment so I make the decision to reward Russ by allowing him to spend some solitary time in the library. To my surprise, this doesn't motivate him. In fact, he resists it! As caregivers, we need to determine the specific "rewards" that motivate each child. We can't assume that they will be motivated by the same things that **we** are. Big mistake.

