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Understanding and Overcoming Learned Helplessness: How to Increase Motivation and Output

"My teacher should have known that I couldn't read, but, because I couldn't read, I had to miss my recess and playing soccer with my friends. I was screamed at and punished because I couldn't read so it made me not want to. I hate reading. It's boring! I just keep thinking I can't read. I'm stupid."

Source: <http://www.ldaca.org/gram/gordon.htm>

A. Definition of Motivation

Motivation: (mo·ti·va·tion) n

1. the act of giving somebody a reason or incentive to do something
2. a feeling of interest or enthusiasm that makes somebody want to do something, or something that causes such a feeling
3. a reason for doing something or behaving in some way
4. the biological, emotional, cognitive, or social forces that activate and direct behavior

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Motivation is dynamic and can change
- ▶ Motivation is sensitive to interpersonal interactions with others
- ▶ Motivation can be influenced by the attitudes of others

3 THEORIES TO EXPLAIN MOTIVATION

ATTACHMENT THEORY

PEOPLE ARE MOTIVATED TO FORM CLOSE EMOTIONAL BONDS, OR ATTACHMENTS, WITH OTHER HUMAN BEINGS IN THEIR LIVES AND THAT OUR CAPACITY TO FORM ATTACHMENTS HAS A GREAT DEAL TO DO WITH OUR ABILITY TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY IN THE WORLD.

(SOURCE: *THE UNMOTIVATED CHILD*, NATALIE RATHVON, PH.D., FIRESIDE PUBLISHING, 1996)

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

- ▶ People can create new attitudes of beliefs or behaviors depending upon the explanations they make. In essence, people who understand their successes and failures shape their self-perception of their abilities.

▶ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 28: 129-137, 1973, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72: 408-422, 1980.

FIXED/GROWTH THEORY

- ▶ People believe that they are smart and they don't want to try anything that would jeopardize their standing versus people who see intelligence developing over time.

▶ *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol Dweck (Stanford University)

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

- ▶ A large body of research shows that people who perceive their success or failure to be a result of personal characteristics (attributes) will be willing to choose cognitively challenging tasks and persevere when confronted by adversity.
- ▶ Four attributes identified in the research:
 - ▶ Effort
 - ▶ Ability
 - ▶ Level of task difficulty
 - ▶ Luck

LOCUS OF CONTROL
INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL CAUSES
STABILITY
DIFFICULTY OF CHANGE
CONTROLLABILITY
DOES THE PERSON HAVE ANY CONTROL OVER THE ATTRIBUTE

ALL OF THESE ATTRIBUTES HAVE THREE PROPERTIES:

Attribute	Locus of Control	Stability	Controllability
Effort	internal	unstable	yes
Ability	internal	stable	no
Level of Task	external	stable	no
Luck	external	unstable	no

RESEARCH SAYS . . .

- ▶ LD children tend not to take credit for good things that happen to them.
 - ▶ "It was easy"
 - ▶ "I had a lot of help"
 - ▶ "Someone felt sorry for me"
 - ▶ "I was lucky"
- ▶ They also blame themselves for failure
 - ▶ "I am stupid"
 - ▶ "I am a failure"

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

- ▶ Learned helplessness and self-deprecating attributions among students with learning disabilities have been widely documented (Bos and Vaughn, 2002)
- ▶ Learned helplessness is the effect of failure, where the belief exists that past failure predicts future failures.

MAIN POINT

- ▶ Teach Growth Theory mindset
 - ▶ We are not “born smart”
- ▶ Learning through experimentation
 - ▶ hypothesis-test-learn-modify-continue
- ▶ We learn through mistakes, hard work, and perseverance

CAROL DWECK AND GROWTH MINDSET RESEARCH

- ▶ Mindset is a simple idea discovered by world-renowned Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck in decades of research on achievement and success –a simple idea that makes all the difference.
- ▶ In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort. They're wrong.
- ▶ In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment. Virtually all great people have had these qualities.

<http://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/about/index.html>

WHAT CAN PARENTS AND TEACHERS DO TO TRY AND HELP THE SITUATION?

- ▶ Attribution statements: focus on effort
- ▶ Strategy statements: focus on the ability to try things a different way
- ▶ Change child's focus from competition with peers
 - ▶ Compete with yourself - take pride in self-improvement
- ▶ Change the child's understanding of intelligence
 - ▶ not "born smart" - get smarter as you learn new things
- ▶ Change the child's belief's about success
 - ▶ success is **not** achieved through luck or that the task was easy
 - ▶ Success is achieved through effort
- ▶ Motivational Interviewing: a method for enhancing intrinsic motivation for change by exploring and resolving ambivalence (Miller and Rollnick, 1991)
Teachers and parents ask open-ended questions, listen to the answers, and try to guide the student to reach a conclusion that encompasses change.

EXAMPLES OF THINGS TO SAY

- ▶ You did a good drawing. I like the detail you added to the person's face.
- ▶ You really studied hard for your test. You read your notes, outlined the book and quizzed yourself. It worked!
- ▶ I like the way you tried a lot of different strategies on the math problem. You stuck with it until you figured it out.
- ▶ Let's talk about what we struggled with today and learned from. Let me tell you about what I learned.
- ▶ Mistakes are really interesting. We can really learn from them.

CONCLUSION

- ▶ *Attribution training, in addition to effective academic skills remediation, can assist LD children in feeling competent and in control of their successes and failures.*
- ▶ *It can help in re-establishing the link between effort and achievement and allow students to become reflective learners as opposed to being overly emotional when they encounter difficulties.*
