



THE PARENT TEAM
HELPING FAMILIES THRIVE

**UNDERSTANDING
& INCREASING
MOTIVATION**

Motivation is a complex subject. Many things affect our motivation on both a short-term and longer-term basis - including our age, gender, temperament and physical and mental health. As we will find out, our child's motivation is closely linked to feelings of safety, autonomy, freedom and fun.

The good news is that children are naturally highly motivated. The less good news is that their motivation is not often directed in the way that we understand as adults or want for them! For example, it's entirely normal that most kids are not excited or motivated to tidy their toys, brush their teeth or go to bed. Many kids are not motivated by their schoolwork, particularly if they are struggling academically. And most are pretty unmotivated to do more schoolwork when they get home!

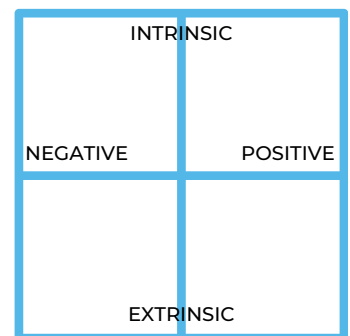
Let's talk about motivation and how we, as parents, can create the optimum environment at home so our children feel inspired, encouraged and empowered to do what needs to be done, including engaging with their academic studies, and how they can develop healthy ways to motivate themselves so they can fulfil their potential.



UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION

We've divided motivation into intrinsic (or internal) and extrinsic (or external), and then into negative and positive.

Let's look at each to understand the nuances and how they develop and where they lead us. One motivational approach - Intrinsic Positive - is the most ideal, but it's not that clear-cut or simple! There are some interesting aspects to the others also



Intrinsic Positive Motivation

When we have Intrinsic Positive Motivation (IPM) we do our best at things because it matters to us, it feels good and right, and ties in with our beliefs about ourselves and the world. IPM has been shown to lead to better performance in the long-term, more commitment, more persistence and more creativity!

Children have lots of natural Intrinsic Positive Motivation because they are wired to explore and experiment, achieve mastery and independence, and enjoy themselves. As we will see, these are fundamental to IPM and, as children, they apply their natural IPM mostly towards playing!

Extending or applying that natural IPM for what we, as adults, view as the serious things - things that matter for the future - takes time because it requires a mature Pre Frontal Cortex. This is the area of the brain that enables us to think forwards, backwards, and sideways. It enables us to weigh up options, consider alternatives and possible consequences. It is also the part of our brain that helps us delay gratification and control our impulses.

We also need to have developed some sense of what we believe matters in life and is right for us as an individual and as part of any group - including our family. This information is stored in our Parietal Lobe, and gives us a frame of reference as we make choices about what we need to do, or when and how we need to do it.

It takes over 20 years for our PFC to develop. In the meantime, there's a lot that parents can do to help their kids develop IPM and we can also, from time to time, add some extrinsic motivation - both positive and negative - in order to encourage our children to get going, keep going, start again and try harder in the things they don't naturally enjoy doing, have no interest or understanding about, or don't yet have the skills to do well.



Extrinsic Positive Motivation

Extensive Positive Motivation (EPM) comes in many forms. Tangible examples include ticks, stars, and stickers, or the grown-up version of loyalty points or BOGOF (buy one, get one free!) offers.

Many of us will use EPM on a regular basis. If we're lucky enough to find joy in running, we'll bounce out of bed, throw on our running shoes, and hit the road, full of dopamine and endorphins. If we're a slightly less enthusiastic runner, for whatever reason, but we really want to commit to running, we're likely to add a little EPM - so we say, when I come back from my run, I can have a latte! Or maybe we set ourselves a challenge of winning a race, for the prestige, or raising money for charity, to keep ourselves running.

Other extrinsic positive motivators include being recognised or celebrated by others, whether that's winning competitions or awards or receiving approval.

There's an interesting gender difference between the motivational power of approval for boys and girls. Without intending to stereotype, most girls are motivated to please people. Pleasing people and gaining approval is of less interest to most boys! In the classroom, girls are more conscientious about their schoolwork, and more eager to comply with the rules. Boys, on the whole, use a last-minute, minimal effort, mad-rush type motivation towards their schoolwork which is so exasperating for parents and teachers alike.

We're going to identify a specific way we can praise our children that motivates in the moment and, over time, leads to Intrinsic Positive Motivation. But there are couple of things we need to be aware of when we use praise and rewards generally.

First, if your child already loves maths, doing lego, writing stories, or singing, we only need to praise a little, from time to time. It's more about showing interest and sharing their passion. Adding additional praise can actually lead to less motivation. It is probably because the extra praise is distracting, and it maybe also be that the extra praise makes our children query their natural love and interest in the activity.

Keep rewards experiential rather than material, and related to the behaviour, as much as possible. Explain to your child how they've earned the reward. And if, from time to time, you decide to take your child out for a pizza to celebrate their love of music or football, or their improved maths results, it's going to be fine!



Extrinsic Negative Motivation

We may feel that anything 'negative' can't be good but Extrinsic Negative Motivation (ENM) can be an effective training tool. It's important to be clear that this is not a fancy word for punishment. Punishment is focussed on stopping an inappropriate behaviour but ENM is aimed at encouraging appropriate behaviour.

So it's a threat or sanction (ie punishment) when we say "if you don't do this, then I won't let you or I will do this". This can get the behaviour happening but it doesn't teach our children healthy long-term lessons or develop long-term motivation. Indeed, threats and sanctions can lead to resistance (so our child suddenly turns to us and shouts "do it, I don't care, whatever, you can't make me") or reliance (so our child needs and waits for the threat or sanction to be present before they get moving).

Extrinsic negative motivation is more about the absence of something pleasant or positive, or the addition of something uncomfortable, associated with a certain behaviour. Experiencing the natural consequence of doing something (or not doing something) can help children learn what to do next time in a particular situation. For example, let's say you've been training your child to remember to take their games kit to school on games days. It's been going OK, and then one day your child forgets to take their trainers, despite our gentle reminder. Then, assuming we know our child is safe and won't be humiliated, we let it happen. We don't rush up to school with the trainers!

Our child won't enjoy the experience of not having their trainers. Maybe they won't be allowed to play games. Maybe they will receive a demerit or black mark of some sort. And maybe they will work something out for themselves. Either way, they are more likely to remember their trainers next time. And they will definitely be more motivated to remember their trainers than if we had rescued them or if we had imposed any additional penalty for leaving the trainers behind.



Intrinsic Negative Motivation

Finally, we have Intrinsic Negative Motivation which is basically acting out of fear and focussed on avoiding feelings of defeat, disappointment, even shame or humiliation. It can work to get a child to do something, but it's not a healthy long-term option. It may be linked to low self-esteem.

To summarise, as parents, we can make judicious use of extrinsic motivators to help our children learn behaviours or develop certain habits which we know will be helpful for them in the future - and find their own positive intrinsic motivation.

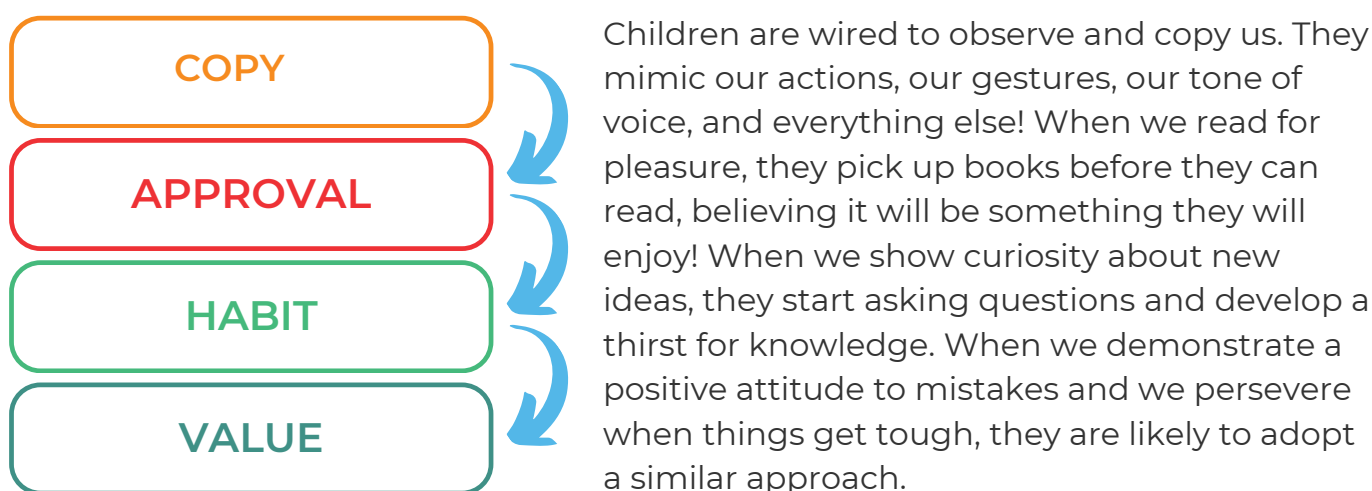
Let's see how these different motivations line up with the way children learn ...



HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Extrinsic motivation is not a long-term strategy. It is hard work for parents to keep up and there's an element of diminishing returns over time. There is also the potential that it hinders the development of Intrinsic Positive Motivation. So where does it fit in, and when should we use it, or not use it?

Although every child learns in slightly different ways - and they definitely learn at different speeds - every child goes through the following stages as they acquire a skill or develop a habit.



As they watch and match our actions, they're looking for a response to work out whether they should continue or stop. When we give our children positive attention for reading, asking questions and persevering, or picking themselves up and trying again, our children repeat these behaviours in order to gain further approval from us, because this positive attention feels so good! It makes them feel successful, engaged, noticed and valued.

After a certain number of repetitions (there's no exact number!) they develop a habit of reading, asking questions and persevering. These actions become automated. They don't really have to actively think about doing them.

Then, as their brain matures, they begin to understand and internalise the value of these habits and behaviours in their Parietal Lobe. These behaviours or actions are now part of their identity. And they gain a depth of experience that doing these things makes them feel good. And that's effectively Intrinsic Positive Motivation!

Of course it's not a smooth line There will be set-backs. And there's a general weakness in the chain between Approval and Habit. We tend to drop our 'approval' because we think the habit is more firmly established than it is. And this is where extrinsic motivations can play their part! We put them into play, as a learning tool, and we keep a watchful eye so that, when they're no longer needed, we set them aside. It's not dissimilar to using training wheels when learning to ride a bike.

[Let's find out the best ways to support and encourage our children to develop positive intrinsic motivation over time ...](#)



DEVELOPING INTRINSIC POSITIVE MOTIVATION

Now we can distinguish between different motivations, we understand the pros and cons of each, and we know the best times and ways to use them. The next step is to look at all the ways parents can help nurture Intrinsic Positive Motivation in their children.

For this workshop, we've chosen to look at the key physiological and psychological needs that underpin motivation, as described in William Glasser's Choice Theory. We've adapted it to be relevant for parents and children!

In Choice Theory, there are 5 needs that must be addressed and satisfied in order to develop motivation. The important thing to recognise is that these are NEEDS, not WANTS or nice-to-haves. A need is a deep and strong drive which we can't ignore. Even when we're not aware of the need, we find ourselves acting in ways to satisfy the need. And that's children and adults!



Whenever these needs are not fulfilled they become stronger than any desire to behave well, to please parents or teachers, or do whatever our child has been asked to do. When parents understand these needs, we can create the optimal environment to help our children's motivation flourish and we can respond effectively when they're struggling to get started or keep going.

As an example, when our child struggles to start or focus on their homework, rather than admonish them about how important it is to do it, or offer a biscuit if they get going, we can appeal to their sense of fun and say *"when you've done this, then you can do "*. We can appeal to their need to belong and feel loved by acknowledging them for something they've done well or better. We can address any worries or concerns they have about their competence, and we can harness their need for input and independence by offering a small choice such as *"do you want to do your homework here, or at my desk next to me?"*.

It's not a magic wand. But it's an effective way forward, so let's look in detail at each aspect



TO FEEL SAFE AND SECURE

We know how hard you work to keep your children safe on the health and safety front. This is more about how secure our children feel - it's emotional rather than practical or logical. When children don't feel secure, despite all our efforts, they are compelled to put all their energy and thinking into finding any way to feel less vulnerable and they do anything to avoid any challenging situations.

When we ask parents what they find helps their children feel secure, they have lots of answers. Let's pick out a couple of things that help children feel strong and safe enough to launch themselves into action and challenge themselves to do new or difficult things.

Provide a calm and consistent environment

As grown-ups, with mature brains and lots of world experience, we often forget how unfamiliar and overwhelming life can be for children. We've had years to get used to the lights, noises, and smells around us. We have lots of times when things didn't go according to plan and we've coped. Many things in day-to-day life are so simple and obvious to us, we don't have to think about them. And sometimes we forget this is not yet the case for our children.

Whereas we might find repetition and routine boring and predictable, children can find it a source of relief - the same meals, the same stories, the same pyjamas or walk to school - because it releases other parts of their brain to be curious and learn new skills. Some children need calm and consistent routines more than others and you will know if this applies to your child.

But all children need moments of calm every day to reflect and restore themselves.

Technology has revealed a vast network in our brains called the Default Mode Network (DMN). Our DMN is active when we're alert and awake but not busy, and a thriving DMN is critical to our brain health. Indeed, there seems to be a link between a weak DMN and anxiety, depression and mental health disorders.

So day-dreaming, fiddling with some crayons or toys, gazing out of the window and basically doing nothing of particular value is a highly valuable activity!

Being on full-scale and top-speed mode can be fun, but we can't maintain it for long periods. Protect time and space at home on a regular basis to boost everyone's DMN. Doing not very much at all is very important!

Promote a healthy attitude to effort and mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes. And everyone struggles to some extent as they acquire and develop skills. But if we come to believe that struggle and mistakes are a problem, and something that needs to be avoided, it adds to our sense of insecurity and inevitably lowers our motivation to try or persevere with anything.

Carol Dweck, at Stanford University, has shown that a healthy attitude towards mistakes and struggle is a key part of a Growth Mindset. There are ways we can promote a Growth Mindset in our families and homes, but it's also deeply rooted in our culture.



from an early age in America, we see struggle as an indicator that you're not very smart ... It's a sign of low ability ... whereas in Asian cultures, they tend to see struggle as a predictable part of learning and an opportunity etc demonstrate that you have the ability to resolve problems through effort and persistence.

James Stigler, UCLA



We promote a Growth Mindset in our families by asking questions such as "what did you today that was hard, what mistakes did you make today, or what went wrong that you didn't expect, how did you feel, what did you do?"

We can also talk about how effort strengthens our brain muscle, just as exercise strengthens our arm or leg muscles. We can discuss how almost every success story has some failure behind it and how learning to pick ourselves up and try again is crucial for our progress.

The single most important thing parents can do to help their children adopt a Growth Mindset is to model it. When we are able to stay calm(ish!) when we make mistakes, articulate how this makes us feel, and what we plan to do next, we give our children a positive pattern to follow. The next step is to take the same calm(ish!) approach to their mistakes. We recognise there's a lot more to this idea, and we cover it in depth in our 'Responding to Misbehaviour' class in our 6-week Positive Parenting Course.



TO BELONG AND FEEL VALUED

As a social species, we have a strong need to feel a trusted and valued member of a group or tribe, in this case our family. So let's look at how we can help our children feel they are valued members of the team at home

Spend time together and show interest in their interests

Parents are busy people with multiple roles and responsibilities who rarely have enough time to do everything we want and need to do! Somehow, we need to find time to spend with each of our children on a 1-1 basis. We recommend 10-20 minutes, once or twice a week. It's about the quality rather than quantity of time.

Let your child lead the conversation in your time together. They may want to ask questions, or tell you (even more!) about their current interest or hobby. Even if you don't share their passion for dinosaurs, skateboarding or TikTok, be curious and ask them questions about what they love about it, why it appeals to them, and how it makes them feel. Ask them to show you their favourite part or teach you how to do it.

Having a hobby or interest is very healthy for children on many levels. While most children's interests change over the years, and most of them don't end up pursuing their early crazes long-term, it can potentially lead to a fascinating vocation or career, or a life-time passion.

Even passing fads leave a long-lasting impact on our children's learning and development because these fads are their first experiences of 'flow' which is the positive mental stage of being fully absorbed and involved in an activity and deriving pleasure from this engagement. Basically, these are their first moments of Intrinsic Positive Motivation.

Show and offer lots of physical affection

Being told we are loved is lovely, but our bodies really need to feel the love! The family therapist, Virginia Satir, recommends 4 hugs a day for survival, 8 hugs a day for maintenance and 12 hugs a day for growth. By the way, a 'good' hug lasts between 5 and 10 seconds.

As our kids grow up, and our days get busier, hugs can fall away. See how many you can reinstate - with your child's consent of course - and feel how much everyone benefits!

Tell family stories

Parents who share stories about their childhood and the wider family offer children the knowledge that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

In “Secrets of Happy Families” Bruce Feiler advises us to avoid the temptation to only tell happy stories. He says we shouldn’t sanitise tales from the past because actually it’s the ‘germs’ of the stories that help our kids develop immunity. When children hear stories about other people finding things hard, or getting worried, or being frustrated or disappointed, it makes it easier for them to handle these feelings themselves.



TO FEEL COMPETENT AND SUCCESSFUL

What's not to like about feeling capable and successful? If you believe in your abilities, and have experience of getting things right or doing things well, or at least better, that's highly motivating. And, of course, the opposite is true. It’s an important part of our role as a parent to help our child feel capable and experience success.

By the way, being protected from challenge or stress or difficulty, or having success bestowed upon you, doesn't help kids feel competent or successful in the long-term.

Point out when your child does something well or better

Children thrive and feel energised when they receive positive attention, particularly from their primary care-givers. Positive attention gives children (and adults!) a boost of the neurochemical dopamine which is such a nice feeling they are driven to repeat the behaviour to get another boost.

Not only that, the more regularly and consistently they receive positive attention for a certain task, they start to get a pre-emptive boost of dopamine as they approach that task. That’s why studies are showing that our dopamine levels play a key role in how we evaluate whether something is worth doing, or not, and whether we get up and get going, or we don’t ...

So when parents consistently help their children feel good about doing things, whether it's starting (and finishing) their homework or revision, or sorting out their laundry, packing their school bag, helping set or clear the table, we wire their brains to anticipate that doing these things will make them feel good.

Now when they think ‘homework’ they get a burst of dopamine at the idea of doing homework!

Please note that our dopamine levels are closely associated with our physical state. If your child is struggling to eat, sleep or exercise well, this needs to be addressed in order to make any progress with their motivation levels.

The truth is that children need a lot more positive attention than we often realise. It's all too easy to fall into the habit of giving more negative attention for behaviours we don't like than the positive alternative.

Saying “*well done, you're amazing, that's brilliant*” to our child is a form of Extrinsic Positive Motivation, but there are ways we can tweak our praise by adding detail and changing the focus of our praise so it becomes more intrinsic.

Prioritise effort and progress

We recognise how important results, scores, marks, and grades can be, and yet we want to use our words to show our child how important effort and progress is. This is fundamental to creating the Growth Mindset which is so motivating!

Elizabeth Hurlock, a developmental psychologist, studied the effect of praise in the classroom with 10-11 year olds. One group were praised for effort, another were criticised for their mistakes, and a third group were given no feedback. After the first day, the kids who were praised and the kids who were criticised had both improved. After 5 days, the children who were given no feedback had improved by 5%. The children who were criticised for their mistakes had improved by 19%. The children who had been praised for their effort had improved by 71%.

Start early to catch the first steps

Catch the energy and potential of any behaviour right at the start! Don't wait until your child is losing focus or starting to get upset before you offer them some Descriptive Praise.

Keep it personal

Comparing our child to a sibling or friend, either positively or negatively, may boost short-term motivation for the child who comes out on top. It doesn't boost the 'losing' child in any positive way! And in the long-term, needing to beat others isn't a long-term positive either.

Here's something about praise that may surprise you

Studies show that praise is more effective at building motivation when it's a little irregular. Praise that is presented on a strict schedule creates a problem – the children start to work with the expectation of receiving praise. So, yes, we do need to praise our kids, but it should come as an unexpected bonus, not a right.

And that means that it's OK when we forget to give praise or positive attention from time to time!

Talk about upcoming challenges beforehand

We all feel better and more motivated to do something new or tricky when we've had a chance to problem-solve and practise beforehand. Make time to sit with your child ahead of the next challenge, and discuss with them what's ahead, what they need to do, what might be hard, and what they might be able to do. Remember to do more asking than telling, because their thoughts, ideas and solutions are much more motivating to them than taking ours on board. It's often a good idea to have a physical run-through too.

However well-prepared we feel and however many times we have practised doing something, there is always a moment of nerves as we leave our Comfort Zone and step out into the unknown

Support your child through the Fear Zone

There is no avoiding the Fear Zone. As loving parents, we often try to minimise or skate right over the Fear Zone in an attempt to motivate our child to get out there and keep going.

Saying *"it's fine, there's nothing to worry about, you can do it, just go for it"* or similar may motivate your child a bit, in that these phrases may reassure them and they may be so keen to please you that they launch themselves into action, but there are better ways



Recognise and accept how your child feels

When your child is showing signs - or telling you directly - that they feel worried about what they're about to do, or upset about something they've just done, go to where they are emotionally. Hearing from you that you're not disappointed with how they feel, and that you understand and are available to support them, is really soothing for them.

Name it to tame it

Imagine how they might be feeling and put it into words for them. We're not going to tell them how they feel - that's too intrusive. Instead we take a tentative approach and say guess, wonder, suppose, maybe, perhaps And we absolutely can refer to their reluctance or resistance to doing something. Identifying it and discussing it does not make it worse! In fact, the opposite is sometimes true.

"You don't want to do your homework. You prefer playing on the iPad. That makes sense."

"I wonder if you're worried it will go wrong. No-one likes making mistakes."

"Perhaps you are feeling all out of puff and just don't know how to get yourself going again."

"I bet you wish you didn't have to do this. It's hard to do things we don't enjoy much."

Let the connection soothe before problem-solving

Sometimes, not always, empathising with our child's emotions can shift them into action in the moment. It certainly does help over time. We can make suggestions to our children about what might help them get going but it's best to wait a few seconds to see if they can come up with their own ideas!

Watch out that, once we've empathised, we don't rush to the fixing bit and say *'But you need to get on with it'* because that's not going to help!

The *'but'* negates the connection we've just made. We know how hard it is to break this habit. See if you can say *'and'* or *'however'* instead. It's a small, but significant, change.

BUT



TO HAVE INPUT AND AUTONOMY

Thousands of studies in homes, classrooms and the workplace, continue to show that people try harder and achieve more when they are appropriately trained and given information and then allowed as much choice and freedom as possible to carry out the task at hand.

Agree baseline rules with partner - then allow input from the children

Family life is easier and more harmonious when effective rules are in place, and consistently upheld in a positive way. But when we create the rules ourselves and then impose them on the children, they perceive the rules to be controlling and limiting, and probably unfair and unreasonable too! Feeling this way does not motivate kids to follow the rules ...

When you're setting rules for mealtimes, bedtimes, homework or digital, we strongly recommend allowing your child some input into the rules at some level. Having a sense of ownership and control over the rules means children are more committed to following them. They don't always get it right, but they're more likely to try!

Offer regular small and safe choices

In a similar vein, keep an eye out for those moments when your child can choose what they do or what happens next. Children actually get remarkable few choices in everyday life, particularly at school, although that's for very understandable reasons! But what about at home? Often we are very intent on making things happen (because there's never enough time) and we make decisions on our child's behalf, which they then resist (which eats up even more time).

It may not sound significant but being allowed to choose whether you wear your coat or carry it, whether you have an apple or a banana, whether you do your homework on the floor or at the kitchen table, help children feel contingent and that boosts their motivation. By the way, make sure you're happy with either option when offering your child a choice. It's not a 'safe' choice for them if you've got a strong opinion about which one is best!

Start to transfer responsibility for homework

Depending on the age and temperament of your child, and if they have any diagnosed or suspected learning concerns, this idea may be challenging. But, at some point, we do have to let our children take responsibility for doing their homework. We have to think about what support and encouragement they need now in order to develop the healthy study habits and motivation to manage homework independently of us in the future.

Children don't have much (if any!) intrinsic positive motivation for homework. Let's look at homework from their perspective to understand why.

Homework happens at a particularly low-energy time of day. It happens in their safe haven of home, which they associate with playing and relaxing.

Maybe your child already understands the topic and can already successfully complete the work in question, in which case they struggle to understand why they need to repeat the exercise again at home when there are so many other things that they prefer to do in their (often quite limited) down-time. Maybe your child is finding the work in question challenging, and doesn't fully understand what they're supposed to be doing, in which case they are reluctant to reveal their struggle in front of their parents.

Taking responsibility for making sure our child has what they need for homework, settles down to do it, completes it with sufficient effort and care, and packs it away, is a hard habit to break. So take it slowly ... Maybe start with not raising homework as the first topic when you meet your child after school! Most parents ask about homework within minutes, and that's a shame because it closes down conversation so we don't get to find out much more about our child's day. And it sends a strong message that doing homework is our top priority, and we don't believe they can be trusted to take it seriously.



TO EXPERIENCE PLEASURE AND HAVE FUN

The final need identified in Choice Theory is, we hope, the easiest to fulfil! Playing, laughing and generally enjoying ourselves is fundamental to our physical, mental and emotional health.

Parents often look at laughing, larking and mucking about, and joking, as signs that our kids are not taking things seriously or we feel they're wasting time when they could be doing something constructive.

We can't imagine how they can possibly be 'learning' when they're goofing around! But it turns out our kids instinctively know that having fun is fundamental to learning and motivation.

We're not going to tell you how to have fun with your kids as we're sure you already know. We will remind you that laughing and enjoying yourself with your child strengthens your relationship and can boost intelligence and cognitive functions too.

So now all you have to do is find a few minutes every day to have fun together!



WHAT ELSE, WHAT NEXT?

If you have any questions and would like to arrange a free 30-minute call, get in touch at hello@theparent.team

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And when you're ready to learn more about positive parenting, join our 6-week online Positive Parenting Course at www.theparent.team