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A Helpful Distinction: Self-Motivation Versus Specific Motivation

In my clinical experience, it is helpful for parents to distinguish between self-motivation and specific motivation. Everyone is fundamentally self-motivated because seeking pleasure and satisfaction is a basic human instinct. Lacking such fundamental self-motivation might be a sign of depression. Most parents are not happy with their teens' lack of motivation in doing specific things like house chores, reading and family activities. Issues with specific motivation might reflect very different underlying problems and call for tailor-made interventions. For example, your children's lack of motivation in completing reading assignments can potentially reflect either a learning disorder or a psychological vulnerability to deal with difficult academic tasks (e.g., poor frustration tolerance), or both. If you are unable to make this distinction, do not hesitate to consult with friends, teachers and professionals.

Motivation: The More It Originates from You, the Less It Will Come from Your Teens!

Ideally, your teens would be motivated to do exactly what you want them to do. However, scientific and everyday observations paint a different picture of reality. The scientific concept of Psychological Reactance refers to our natural inclination to resist any external force that feels like a restriction of personal freedom and choices. "Do it because I tell you to do so" might make your children to do what you want, but it will never be transformed into a core motivation. Most teenagers know their parents have an agenda for them such

that their psychological space is constantly filled with expectations and values—when they fall short of these, feelings of guilt, shame, frustration, anger and sadness often follow. There isn't much psychological space left to think deeply into their goals and aspiration in life. It is tempting for parents to impose their will on their children on what they should do. It is time to try something different.

Provide Space for Your Children's Self-Agency

When teens have the psychological space to self-reflect, they will be intrinsically driven to pursue their goals and interests. Sure, they will make mistakes and bad choices along the way, but they will learn and adapt. Most children with micromanaging or controlling parents resist what their parents want for them every chance they get. Parents might see this as a sign of laziness or immaturity, but professionals view it as the children's desperate fight for self-agency, the sense that "I am the one who controls my life". Research has shown that a solid sense of agency is highly correlated with many positive outcomes: better physical and mental health, longer lifespan, higher performance in academics and sports, etc. It is in your best interest to provide the right conditions for your children's self-agency to grow and evolve.

The Most Effective Advice Happens When Your Child Needs It

Put it simply, do not pressure your teens with advice or suggestion when they don't need it, so they might actually turn to you when they do need it. The sense that "I am fundamentally accepted, loved and valued by my parents" is the core of every child's self-esteem. Children feel less valued, loved and accepted when your speech is always

I was at a crossroads in my life feeling very stagnated and unmotivated about school. My future was looking very gloomy. James helped me to gain a lot of insights and rebuild my motivation through a very detailed psychological assessment and later in ongoing counselling.

about how they should live their lives differently. It is important to be sensitive and attune to your children's emotional needs. Without empathy and sensitivity, your good intention will never meet your children's needs. Put your ego and anxiety aside and start rebuilding an empathic relationship with your children. For instance, when your teen is unmotivated about going to school, you might reflect to them like this: "I see that you don't feel like going to school and I guess you must have a good reason. How can I support you?" Such listening and interactive skills are not easy to master, but it is not unattainable with professional guidance.

Fostering Independence: Invite Your Teen to Take Charge of Family Tasks

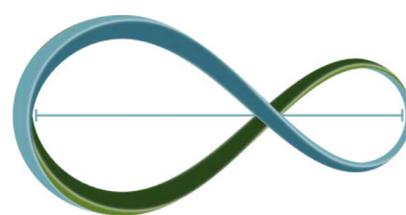
Never force anything on your children. If you have an idea, run it by them first. Teenagers enjoy novel, interesting and challenging tasks especially when their self-esteem and self-worth are not under scrutiny. For example, you can gently invite them to help plan a family vacation, search for a new TV, organize a birthday celebration for grandma or manage a family album online. Your children might want to contribute to the family more than you think. You just need to offer them more opportunities to feel useful and competent as a family member. Don't forget to recognize their good organization, planning and effort! Give them credit where it is due.

Fostering Independence: Find Opportunities to Ask your Teen for Opinions

We experience a sense of self-importance when other people ask us for our inputs—it feels as though our own thoughts and ideas are considered valuable. To enhance your children's independence, you can find opportunities to ask them for opinions. If you are trying to lose weight, ask them for some exercise and dietary recommendations. If grandpa is struggling with everyday forgetfulness, ask them to find video games that train memory. You can occasionally share your own stories in friendly, peer-like conversation. Many teenagers actually enjoy being a positive presence in your lives.

Fostering Independence: Reinforce Your Child's Will but Not the Outcome

There are enough pitfalls in a teenager's journey to become an independent person. There is not much out there that hurts teens more than receiving rejecting or discouraging comments from parents. When your children fall short of expectations, you will certainly feel upset and frustrated. This is where you need to supercharge your emotional intelligence and show them the adaptive way to handle negative emotions. To support their growing independence, you can focus on highlighting or recognizing the thoughtfulness behind their actions: "I am happy to see that you are trying out a different approach this time" "I notice that you don't give up easily." "The outcome might not show it but I see your effort in making changes."



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Lifespan Counselling is a boutique psychology group practice. Our specialties and expertise encompass all age groups: children, teens, young adults, adults, and seniors. Conveniently located in Central, our diverse and experienced team of mental health professionals is committed to serving the mental health needs of the Hong Kong community.

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