

# Motivating Underachievers: 9 Steps to Take When Your Child Says “I Don’t Care”

By James Lehman



Is your child’s answer to everything, “I don’t care” or “It doesn’t matter?”

Parents often think that if they can find a new way to encourage their child, he or she will magically start achieving more.

I don’t think it’s like that at all. I think the problem is that these kids are motivated to resist, to withdraw, and to underperform. They act out by acting *in*.

The first thing to understand about teens and pre-teens who seem to have no motivation is this: it’s impossible to have no motivation. Everybody is motivated in some way.

And these kids are motivated to resist and to do nothing.

Understand that to do nothing is an action. It’s an action to resist—to resist their parents and to resist their teachers. They’re *motivated* to say, “I don’t care,” with their words and their actions.

Once you realise that your adolescent is motivated to do nothing, it will become obvious to you that she puts a lot of energy into doing that “nothing.” She puts a lot of energy into resisting you and withdrawing from you.

When you talk with adolescents who are underachievers, you hear them express ideas that are what I call thinking errors. They say:

*“It’s too hard.”*

*“I can’t.”*

*“It doesn’t matter.”*

And most of all, they say:

*“I don’t care.”*

In fact, “I don’t care” is their magic wand and their shield. “I don’t care” takes the pressure off them and makes them feel in control. When they start to feel anxious, it soothes them to say, “I don’t care.”

Fear of failure? *“I don’t care.”*

It’s hard to do? *“I don’t care.”*

It’s how they try to solve the basic problems of everyday life.

The first step in addressing this problem is to understand that you can’t *make* your child care. Let’s be honest, the old saying, “You can bring a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” is true.

But you can make him thirsty. And that’s the key to managing the child who says “I don’t care.”

Here are 9 steps to take when your underachieving child says “I don’t care.”

### **1. Identify What You Can Use for Rewards and Incentives**

Look for things that can be used as rewards for your child. Make a point of observing what your child cares about and enjoys. And don’t take his word for it because he’ll tell you he doesn’t care about anything. He’ll say that “nothing matters.”

But look at his actions. If he watches TV, plays on the computer, plays video games, or texts with his friends, you know what he likes already.

Does he like going to the movies? Does he like going fishing? Take an inventory of the things he enjoys and write it all down on a piece of paper.

While I usually recommend that parents sit down with their kids and draw up this list together, in the case of kids who tend to withhold, I don’t think it’s a good idea. Don’t ask a child who uses **passive-aggressive behaviour** because he won’t tell you. Remember, withholding is his way of maintaining control.

Once you have an inventory of what he likes, you can use these things as incentives and rewards.

*Note to parents: a child who won’t attend to his work or do his chores is different from someone who’s depressed. If your child won’t come out of his room, doesn’t seem to care no matter what you take away, and is often isolated and withdrawn, you have to take that seriously and seek professional help.*

### **2. Take the Electronics Out of His Room**

I think underachieving kids should not have electronics in their rooms. Look at it this way: their room is just a place for them to withdraw.

If you have a child who holes up in his bedroom, the computer should be in the living area. And if he’s going to use it, he should be out there with other people.

He also shouldn’t have a TV or video games in his room. And if he’s not performing, don’t let him have his cell phone, either.

### **3. Make Your Child Earn Privileges**

I think that you have to hold unmotivated kids accountable. Make sure everything is earned. Life for these kids should be uncomfortable if they do not meet their daily responsibilities.

Make them earn video games every day. And how do they earn them? By doing their homework and chores. In the same way, make them earn their cell phone today and then start over tomorrow.

This is how real life works. If you don’t work, you don’t get paid, and you don’t get the things you want.

### **4. Talk about What Your Child Wants**

When times are good, I think you should talk to your child about what he would like to have someday. Try to sneak in different ideas to get your child to think about how he will achieve what he wants in life.

Sit down with your child and say:

*“So what kind of car would you like to have? Do you like Jeeps?”*

Try to get him to talk about what he’d like. Because later on you can say:

*“Look, I care about you and I want you to get that Jeep—and you’re not going to get it by unless you do your homework.”*

As a parent, I’d be talking this way to your child from pre-adolescence onward. You can say things like:

*“Just think, someday you’re going to have your own place. What kind of place would you like?”*

That’s the type of thing you use to **motivate adolescents** because that’s what is real to them. They want to have an apartment. They want to have a girlfriend or boyfriend. And they want to have a car.

So have conversations about what it takes to attain those things.

And don’t forget, it’s a mistake to give your teen or pre-teen lectures when you want them to do something. Instead, make them see that completing their responsibilities is in their best interests because it leads to the life they’d like to have in the future.

## **5. Don’t Shout or Argue**

If you’re shouting, you’re just showing your frustration—and letting your child know that he’s in control.

Here’s the truth: when people start shouting, it means they’ve run out of solutions. With underperforming kids, I think you have to be very cool. Arguing, pleading, and trying to get your teen to talk about how they feel is not very effective when they’re using withholding as a relationship strategy.

In my opinion, you can try almost anything within reason for five minutes. You can negotiate, you can reason, you can ask your child about their feelings. It’s fine to say, “Is something wrong?” Just be aware that a chronic withholder will be motivated to ignore you.

## **6. Tell Your Child That What She Does Matters to You**

Tell your child that what she does matters to you. Personalize it by saying:

*“It matters to me. I care about you. I want you to do well. I can’t make you do it and I won’t force you. But it matters to me and I love you.”*

By the way, when I tell parents to personalise it by saying “It matters to me,” that doesn’t mean you should take it personally. Taking something personally means believing that your child’s inappropriate behaviour is directed at you. It’s not. In reality, their behaviour is their overall strategy to deal with the stresses of life.

The concept of “It Matters to Me” helps because relationships can be motivating. Nevertheless, understand that your child is her own person. It’s no reflection on you if she doesn’t want to perform. You just have to set up an approach to enhance the probability that she’s going to meet her responsibilities.

But again, don’t take it personally, as if somehow you have to make her do it. The truth is, you can’t make her do anything that she doesn’t want to do. But you can hold her accountable.

## **7. Don’t Do Your Child’s Work**

Kids learn early on that when they give up or act helpless that someone will step in and help them. Acting helpless becomes a way to get other people to do things for you. Psychologists refer to this as **learned helplessness**. And over time, you come to believe that you are helpless. It’s a bad lesson to learn.

When kids and teens use this shortcut, they don’t learn independence. In fact, in families where this occurs, many times you’ll find that the kids weren’t allowed to be independent. Perhaps they had to do things a certain way and all the choices were made for them. Eventually, they gave up. They surrendered.

Regardless of why your child might have developed learned helplessness, as a parent, it's important to stop doing things that he needs to do for himself. Don't do his homework for him. Don't do his chores for him. Don't do his laundry for him. Let him do those things. You can be available for help if necessary, but don't take on his tasks.

I believe one of the most important things an adolescent has to learn is independence. And if you take on his responsibilities, you're robbing him of his opportunity to learn independence.

## **8. Coach Your Child**

Let's face it: it's often sports coaches who get the most out of our kids. It's their job to help kids to want to improve their skills.

A good coach is constantly developing his players by challenging them and complimenting them on the specifics of their progress:

*"Nice layup, Josh. You positioned your hands better that time. Keep it up!"*

You should do the same with your kids when they meet a responsibility.

Also, a good coach doesn't use unearned praise as a motivator. Telling someone how great they are at something when they aren't isn't helpful. Kids see through flattery and false praise just like adults do. And it usually backfires.

I think parents need to learn more about the coaching parenting style. Always keep your child looking forward. Comment on his or her progress instead of telling them how great they are when they haven't put forth much of an effort.

## **9. Set Deadlines and Use Structure**

Tell your child clearly when to do chores and schoolwork—and when you want them done by. I think it's important to schedule these kids, to give them structure. Say to your child:

*"Do your chores from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m., and then you'll have free time until dinner. And during free time, you can do whatever you want to do."*

There are many possibilities. You could say:

*"If you can accomplish this in X amount of time, we'll go to your cousin's house on Saturday."*

Remember, not everything that your child likes to do costs money, so be creative and use your list of what your child likes for ideas.

## **Conclusion**

Being an underachiever gives your child a sense of control and power because then he doesn't have to worry about the anxiety of failure or meeting challenging responsibilities. He doesn't have to compete with other kids. He doesn't have to deal with other people's expectations.

A large part of underachieving has to do with managing other people's expectations. That's because once you start to achieve, people expect more of you. Kids feel this quite powerfully and they don't have much defense against it. So you'll often see that when people start expecting more of these kids, they fall apart.

For me, it's not about who's to blame. It's about who's going to take responsibility. A kid who's an underachiever is motivated to do less—or to do nothing—because it gives him a sense of power and it gets him out of the stress of having to meet responsibilities.

Your job as a parent is to help him by coaching him to meet those responsibilities in spite of his anxiety, fear, or apathy. And your job is to hold him accountable with consequences if he chooses not to meet those responsibilities.

*About James Lehman, MSW*

*James Lehman, who dedicated his life to behaviourally troubled youth, created **The Total Transformation®**, **The Complete Guide to Consequences™**, **Getting Through To Your Child™**, and **Two Parents One Plan™**, from a place of professional and personal experience. Having had severe behavioural problems himself as a child, he was inspired to focus on behavioural management professionally. Together with his wife, Janet Lehman, he developed an approach to managing children and teens that challenges them to solve their own problems without hiding behind disrespectful, obnoxious or abusive behaviour.*