

Lack of Motivation is a Form of Resistance

By James Lehman



When kids won't get out of bed, won't do their homework or school assignments, or won't get involved in activities, it's important for parents to realize that there *is* motivation in the child. But the motivation is to *resist*. The motivation is to do things their way, not yours. The motivation is to retain power.

When kids feel powerless, they try to feel powerful by withholding. A child or teenager who feels very powerless will stay in bed, not go to school, avoid homework, sit on the couch, and withhold overall involvement because it gives her a sense of being in control.

To the parent, the behaviour looks completely out of control. But the child sees it as the only way to have control over what's going on around him.

You'll see it when you ask your child a question and he doesn't answer, but you know he heard you. What's that all about? That's a child withholding an answer to feel powerful. When he says, "I don't have to answer you if I don't want to," you see it as a lack of motivation. He sees it as a way to win control over you.

All Kids are Motivated by Something

I want to be clear about this point: everyone is motivated. The question is, motivated to do what? If a child looks like he's not motivated, you have to look at what he's accomplishing and assume that this is what he's motivated to do.

So part of the solution is getting him to be motivated to do something else. To assume that the child is unmotivated is an ineffective way of looking at it. He is motivated. He's simply motivated to do nothing. In this case, doing nothing means resisting and holding back to exercise control over you.

Kids Resist Because They Lack Problem-Solving Skills

The child who uses resistance as a form of control lacks both social skills and problem-solving skills.

They don't have the social skills to know how to talk to other people, how to be friendly, and how to feel comfortable with themselves. Also, they don't have the problem-solving skills to figure out what people want from them, how to deal with other people's behaviour, and how to meet expectations and demands.

These are basic skills we all have to learn in order to be successful as adults.

If continually resisting is how a child tries to solve problems, then parents will have a hard time until they teach the child how to solve problems appropriately.

The first step in teaching kids problem-solving skills is to understand that these kids are not helpless victims. Instead, they're simply trying to solve problems in an ineffective manner.

Don't Argue or Fight With Your Child About Motivation

Very often these kids are motivated by the power struggle. They find different ways to have that struggle with their parents. The job of the parents, therefore, is to find other ways for the child to solve the problem that's causing the power struggle.

But if parents don't have those other ways then the power struggle continues with no end in sight.

If you're fighting day after day with a kid who won't get out of bed, you're never going to solve that problem. Because even if he gets out of bed then he won't brush his teeth. And even if he brushes his teeth then he won't comb his hair. Or he won't wear clean clothes, or he won't do his homework.

Understand that when you yell at your child for lack of motivation, you're giving their resisting behaviour power. So don't yell. Don't argue. Don't give their resisting behaviour power.

I understand that parents get frustrated—that's normal. And sometimes you will lose your calm, even when you know better.

The point I want to make here is that yelling and fighting won't solve the problem. If you're yelling and fighting over these issues, you're giving him more power in the struggle, and you don't want to do that. Here's what to do instead.

Be Clear, Calm, and Give Consequences for Your Child's Behaviour

Make the situation clear for the child. Use "I" words. Say the following:

"I want you to get up out of bed and get ready for school."

"I want you to do your homework now."

Then leave the bedroom. If the kid doesn't do it, then there should be consequences. There should be accountability.

If your child says, "I don't care about the consequences," ignore her. She will tell you she doesn't care just as a way to feel in control. Or, she may not care now, but as consequences get applied consistently, she will eventually see compliance as a better alternative to consequences.

Therefore, give consequences. And don't worry if the kid doesn't like it. You are not your child's friend, you're their parent.

By the way, if your child doesn't get out of bed, he shouldn't be doing anything else. He shouldn't get to play video games. He shouldn't spend four hours in front of the TV. If he's too sick to go to school, he shouldn't be going out of the house. These rules should be set and enforced consistently.

Give Effective Consequences

Understanding what is and what is not an effective consequence is critical. The right consequences actually motivate your child to good behaviour. They put you back in control and teach your child how to problem-solve, giving your child the skills needed to be a successful adult.

Know that effective consequences are not punishments. Indeed, I say all the time that you can't punish your child into behaving better.

Let Your Child Experience Natural Consequences

I would always tell parents in my office that you have to have the courage to let her experience the consequences of her behaviour. It takes a lot of courage for a parent to step back and say:

"Okay, you're not going to do your homework, and you're going to get the grades that reflect that."

But in these cases, it can help to let the child experience the natural consequences of resistance. You don't let the kid watch TV. You say:

"Homework time is from six to eight. And if you don't want to do your homework during that time, that's fine. But you can't go on the computer, you can't play games, and you can't watch TV. If you choose not to do your homework, that's your choice. And if you fail, that's your choice too."

Remember, natural consequences are an important part of life. That's why we have speeding tickets. A speeding ticket is a natural consequence. If you go too fast, the policeman stops you and gives you a ticket. He doesn't follow you home to make sure you don't speed anymore. He lets you go. It's *your* job to stop and take responsibility. If you don't, you're going to get another ticket fifteen minutes later.

Natural consequences help people take responsibility, and they can be used to help kids take responsibility for things like going to school, participating in class, and doing homework.

Don't Forget to Use Rewards

Along with the plan to let her experience the natural consequences of her decisions, build in rewards for success if she does make the right decision.

For example, if my son failed a test, there was no punishment. But if he passed, there was a reward. It was very simple. We rewarded A's and B's. We didn't take anything away for C, we just didn't reward it.

So my son eventually strived to have A's all the time. So with kids who resist, it's important to have a rewards system as well as a consequence system.

Be Patient and Persistent

Calmly and consistently using effective consequences is your fastest and best way to get your child motivated. Just be patient and persistent as consequences do their job and your child begins to learn better problem-solving skills. And know that the vast majority of kids come around and get motivated once they are held accountable in a meaningful way.

About the author

James Lehman, who dedicated his life to behaviourally troubled youth, is a parenting expert developed 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. Empowering Parents now brings this insightful and impactful program directly to homes around the globe