

4th Mile: Motivation through Positive Attention

Internal vs. external motivation

Children naturally want to please and they enjoy success. Usually, if a child is engaged, understands and is able, there will be “internal motivation” to comply with requests and perform tasks. Do this, *feel* that. The behavioral reinforcement comes from within the child. However, there are times when there is truly “nothing in it” for the child. Maybe there is something about the child’s profile or the task that even creates a disincentive. In these situations, “external motivation” is necessary. External motivation means increasing the child’s willingness to comply or perform by attaching positive or negative consequences to specific behaviors. Do this, *get* that. The behavioral reinforcement comes from outside the child. External motivators include positive attention (discussed in this session), natural consequences and rewards (discussed in later sessions).

Normal moral development: The shift from external to internal motivation

1. ***Dependence:*** Infants constantly refer to their parents for approval or disapproval. Toddlers live for their parents’ attention. The young child does not yet carry his or her own behavioral compass. He or she is consequence driven, the most powerful consequence being the parent’s immediate reaction. For many reasons, many older children - even adults - continue to need external motivation, despite adequate engagement, understanding and ability.
2. ***Transition:*** As children grow, they learn what to expect from the adults in their world. They internalize an external code. By remembering a long rich history of parental reactions, they carry inside “the family rule book”; sometimes acting in accordance with it, sometimes in defiance of it, but always with reference to it. They are still driven by consequence, but now the consequences are more delayed and more abstract; having to do with internal feelings such as shame, pride, and guilt. Driven by concern for what their parents would think, they act *as if* their parents were right there.
3. ***Independence:*** As children develop, they gradually begin to consider the reasons for different demands. Without reference to the reaction of adults, they ponder the difference between right and wrong. They examine their own lives; what is worthwhile, what is necessary, what is beautiful, what is comforting. They develop their own internal code. Sometimes, this evolving code incorporates many of their parents’ values; sometimes not. Sometimes, the internally motivated child acts in ways that bring personal gratification. Other times, the internally motivated child acts knowing full-well that there may not be anything in it for him or her; it might even bring hardship; but the child does it anyway because it is right. In the end, the child will have to live with him or herself.

Risks of using external motivation

- ***Missing the root of the problem:*** Before jumping to rewards and punishments, adults should think carefully about the source of their child's behavior problem. Remember, a child's apparent lack of motivation is usually secondary to problems with engagement, understanding or ability. Sometimes parents think a child needs a system of rewards when all that is really necessary are clear expectations and regular feedback. Some children feel that nothing they do matters; that any effort is simply not worth it. Direct discussion of this "learned helplessness" may be necessary. (See session six on "Empathy" and session 9 on "Problem Solving".)
- ***Undermining natural drive:*** External motivators can undermine a child's internal motivation or natural drive. If a child is already able and willing, the last thing we should do is suggest that he or she needs an even "better reason". We should never use external motivation systems when the child is providing his or her own positive reinforcement from within. If the challenge, pleasure or rightness of the task is already enough, then we should leave well-enough alone.
- ***Prolonging dependence:*** Overuse of external motivators can interfere with the development of self-reliance and the formulation of an internal moral code. Let's say a child needs some external motivation. Let's say this works. How long should we maintain such dependence? If some scaffolding is necessary to erect a building, when should that scaffolding be taken down? How do we give children the help they need to get started, but then withdraw that help so that they can learn to succeed on their own? Furthermore, as discussed above, our goal is not just self-reliance but moral development; that is, a sense of right and wrong. Children need to learn that some things should be done even when there is nothing in it for them.

Positive Attention for Compliance and Performance

Parents can increase compliance and encourage task performance by simply giving positive attention. Everybody needs to be noticed; some more than others.

- ***Simple noticing:*** When doing a particular task does not give your child enough of a warm and fuzzy feeling inside, just knowing that mom or dad is watching might be much more motivating. There are many jobs that children will perform gladly, if they just don't have to do them alone. Sometimes all we need to do is let our children know that we are there. Work along side, pull up a chair, or pop in and out. Just lend your presence. You may not have to say a thing.
- ***Effective praise:*** Most children live for their parent's approval. Positive feedback should be given in a way that is noticeable and meaningful to each child. Most of us are accustomed to giving verbal feedback. For example, "I like the way you are picking up your things so carefully." For many children, non-verbal feedback can be powerful. Visual communication can be very effective. For example, thumbs-up, wink, appreciative smile, or proudly make a check on a to-do list. Applause combines both sights and sounds of appreciation. Don't forget touch: high-five, hug, and congratulatory rub of the head or back. Some very sensitive children react negatively to praise that is "too exuberant;" for them, a more subtle and muted approach works

better. Other under-sensitive children need their parents to be more animated and dramatic.

- ***Comment on the quality of the performance, not the worth of the person:*** Doing a good job has nothing to do with being a “good boy” or “good girl”. Avoid generalizations; not just negative ones but positive too. Such statements not only might harm a child’s self-image; they potentially cause confusion about what exactly is being praised. Be specific. “You’re doing a good job lining up the spoons next to the knives,” *rather than*, “Mommy loves you!” or “You’re such a big girl”.
- ***Praise immediately:*** Do not wait for completion of the task. Positive attention must be given *while* the child is doing the task, not just afterwards. To fuel initiation, it is very important to give your child positive attention as he or she is getting started. This is usually when praise is most needed but least given. To sustain effort, give additional positive attention intermittently throughout performance of the task. Some parents feel that they should withhold praise or attention “until the job is done”. To the contrary, the child who is complimented early and often is more likely to see difficult tasks through to completion.

Spacing and Fading Positive Attention

Spacing and fading are used to teach children delayed gratification and self-reliance. After determining their child’s current level of independent functioning, parents should target the next level up, not expecting too much or too little. Over time, parents should move from providing maximum to minimum support; that is, from what is sufficient to what is necessary. At first, if there is too little help, a child may lose motivation. To get him or her started, parents should give sufficient immediate positive attention. Over time, if there is too much help, a child may become too dependent. Therefore, once her or she responds, parents should deliberately “space and fade” their support; gradually toning down, shortening and delaying the positive attention, giving only what is truly necessary, eventually withdrawing help entirely. In this way, supported success leads to independent capability.

I am not comparing children to dogs, but I have found that the following example helps many parents understand what spacing and fading mean. My dog’s trainer taught me how to incrementally tone down commands while lengthening both the time between positive comments and the distance from which such feedback is given. (With children, I recommend behavior-specific praise such as “good sitting.” With dogs, general praise such as “good girl” is fine.)

- **Getting started. Immediate, close, and clear.** To insure initial compliance: loud verbal command (“Sasha! Sit, stay!”); bold gesture (arm and finger forcefully pointing to the ground for “sit” then arm extended and palm out like a traffic cop for “stay”); tactile input (pushing down on her rear and pulling up on her collar); immediate verbal (“good girl”), tactile (back rub), and gustatory (doggie treat) positive feedback; all delivered very frequently and from very close range (face to face).
- **Gradually fade.** The volume of the verbal command is gradually lowered and even faded out altogether. The command gestures are gradually toned down to just a

quick point of the finger for “sit” and a subtle hand sign for “stay”. The tactile input is gradually softened and phased out entirely. Incrementally less doggie treat is provided until it is no longer necessary.

- **Gradually space.** Increase delays and distances. Positive attention is gradually spaced from being offered immediately upon compliance, to a few seconds lag, to many seconds, to minutes, and so on. Just as gradually, positive attention is delivered from farther and farther away.
- **Imagine.** Step one: “Sasha, Sit, stay.” Compliance. Then immediately and without leaving her side, “Good girl.” Step two: “Sit, stay.” Compliance. Take one step away and then, after a few seconds, one step back, “Good girl.” Step three: “Sit.” Compliance. Take two steps away and then, after 10 seconds, back, “Good girl.” As I space, I gradually fade until just the subtle hand gestures are necessary for compliance. I walk all way across the yard and hide behind a tree for 20 minutes. She dutifully waits for my return. I come back and say, “Good girl,” even though I didn’t need to.

Back to children. Commonly, when parents most want children to function independently, children most need attention. Spacing and fading work well when adults want their children to do something without interrupting them. Before spacing and fading, we must first communicate our expectations, stating very clearly what we want the child to do and that we do not want to be interrupted. Consequently, such commands require two specific parts:

“I want you to:

- Go to sleep
- Do your homework
- Play with your toys
- Read your book
- Practice piano

“And I don’t want you to interrupt while I:

- Read my book
- Talk on the phone
- Do my work
- Talk to these people (visiting or visited)
- Rest

If parents give children more positive attention for independent behavior, they will not need to react with negative attention to disruptive behavior. By deliberately interrupting their own activities to intermittently give attention to their children, parents can prevent unwanted attention seeking. After giving immediate, close and high intensity attention to get the child started, parents can gradually space and fade, giving positive attention with gradually longer delays, from longer distances and with greater subtlety.

Susie has a history of interrupting her Mom during phone calls. Her mother decides to try some spacing. The phone rings. “Susie, I’m gong to have to get the phone. You play with your toys here while I talk - and no interrupting. Oh look, you’re getting out your Jasmine figure!” Mom picks up the phone on the fourth ring,

maintaining eye contact with Susie, giving her a smile and a wink as she answers: "Hi Marsha. How are you? Can I put you on hold for one second while I get my daughter occupied? Thanks. Be right back" Mom quickly comes back to Susie and gets down at eye level. "Susie, I see you've got Jasmine playing with Aladdin. That's great and thanks for letting mommy talk on the phone." She returns to the phone standing in the doorway to maintain visual contact with Susie. Gradually, while talking on the phone, Mom gives Susie fewer of these non-verbal signs of approval. After a minute, she can stretch the cord or wander with the cordless back to the floor near Susie and give more non-verbal and whispered praise for playing so well and not interrupting. Then back to the kitchen, this time deliberately if only momentarily breaking visual contact. Then visual contact and nonverbal positive attention become even less frequent and less prolonged. During this phone conversation and ones that follow over the months, the positive strokes for independent play continue but they are progressively subtler, fewer and farther between.