

# A Baker's Dozen: 13 Ways to Ignite the Motivational Flame

By [Steven Pfeiffer](#) | Dec 19, 2012



## Synopsis

***Not all kids are equally motivated. Students vary tremendously in their motivation, even at an early age. Here is a baker's dozen of motivational strategies that can re-ignite the motivational flame.***

In the talks and workshops that I give, both here in the U.S. and internationally, a frequent question that comes up, asked by both professionals and parents alike, is how to deal with underachieving students. Teachers and parents seem especially perplexed with how to motivate students lacking even nascent motivation. This is a fair question. And this is an important question. But I have found that it is not easy to answer, especially in an audience of 600 parents or teachers! There are so many different reasons for low motivation. Perhaps, in fact, there are as many causes for underachievement as students who appear turned off by school and academics.

Of course, motivation is very important – really, it is critical for learning to occur. Especially higher-order learning. Motivation is important at all levels of learning and for students at every age and grade. And motivation is equally important for all learners; kids of average ability, students of low ability, and even high ability kids. Having served as director of the pre-collegiate gifted program at Duke University, and more recently as co-director of a summer academy in science, engineering and space technology for Florida's brightest high school students, I have repeatedly observed first-hand the importance of motivation. And as a professor at a leading university, I have also observed the profound role that motivation plays in the success of graduate students. Even among extraordinarily bright students, we repeatedly see individual differences in students' levels of drive, enthusiasm, persistence, determination, commitment, and zest. This is, simply put, a fact of life. Kids vary tremendously in their motivation.

I've observed that kids of all ages and ability levels vary tremendously in their level of academic motivation. The field doesn't yet have a measure of motivation with quite the preciseness or discriminatory ability of IQ tests. But if we did, we'd see that kids vary as much in how much motivation they are willing to expend in school as they vary in their intellectual ability. There is a huge amount of variance! Spend ten minutes talking with any seasoned teacher – a kindergarten teacher working in an inner city school or a professor at a small, elite New England college, and they'll both relate stories about students they've had in their career who were inexplicably apathetic, bored, disinterested, unmotivated. They'll also be able to share stories about the passionate and animated student who relished challenging learning activities and even seemed to enjoy homework assignments! ...Highly motivated students who they fondly remember as enthusiastic, determined, persistent, and passionate about learning.

Readers familiar with my research and writing know that I pirate much of my thinking about motivation, kids' achievement and success in life from my work with young, elite soccer players. My latest book on high ability kids, *Serving the Gifted: Evidence-Based Clinical and Psycho-educational Practice* (NY: Routledge; available online at Amazon.com at: <http://www.amazon.com/Serving-Gifted-Evidence-Based-Psychoeducational-School-Based/dp/041599750X> ) discusses the processes underlying talent development on the playing field and in the classroom. I observed from the sidelines as a parent – and later as a psychologist consulting with the Duke women's soccer team, how important motivation is in transforming the quite extraordinary general and specific sports-related abilities of very young athletes into the highly developed soccer skills of NCAA competitors and even world class champions. I've come to recognize that the same developmental processes hold true in the classroom and science lab as on the soccer field (as well as in the courtroom, surgical operating room, artist's studio, performing stage, or really any culturally valued arena!). Motivation makes a real difference.

There are many theories and a ton of research on motivation and its relationship to learning and performance. I would bore many readers expounding on this rich literature. Let me only very briefly mention a few noteworthy names and theories. Early pioneers include Henry Murray, who wrote on curiosity as an innate motive in the 1930's. McClelland and Atkinson later introduced the concept of achievement motivation in the '50s. Of course, Pavlov in Russia and Skinner here in the states pioneered our understanding of classical and operant learning. Robert White, also in the '50s, proposed the competence motive, and DeCharms soon after wrote about self-determination. DeCharms' work set the stage for later ideas about self-efficacy, exploratory behavior, and motivation. More recently, Bandura introduced us to social learning theory and the power of self-efficacy, and Deci and Ryan – whose work I am rather fond of, advanced a theory of self-determination, proposing the psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. As you can see, there is indeed a rich motivation literature that can help explain both why a student might be unmotivated and how to ignite a spark to kindle the motivational flame.

Rest assured that I'm not going to discuss these theories or the many reasons for low motivation. That's a story for another article! What I will share are thirteen proven motivational strategies and techniques that can and often do make a real difference. Some of these techniques and strategies are what I call universal. They work for almost all students, irrespective of learning style or level of ability. They tend to work regardless of geography, gender, or social class. There are other motivational strategies, on the other hand, with less robust and more limited effectiveness. They work with some, but not all students. Okay, here are my baker's dozen. Some apply to both parents and teachers, but most are specific to helping educators ignite the motivational flame in their students:

**Stop Telling Kids That They are Smart.** This is one of those universal principles that applies to all kids, but especially bright kids with motivational issues. It is a recommendation that can be utilized equally to parents and teachers. Reminding kids how bright they are is well-intentioned but inadvertently conveys to the child that because they are so smart, because they have such a special brain, they shouldn't have to work very hard on academic tasks. This can create what Carol Dweck calls a fixed or entity self-conception of one's intelligence. A more powerful message that parents and teachers can offer is to repeatedly communicate how very important effort and working hard is for success in the classroom and life.

**Give Frequent, Early, Positive Feedback.** This is one of the non-universal motivational strategies; it can be very effective for some, but not work for all kids with motivational issues. It is what psychologists call a 'behavioral' intervention, based on reinforcement principles. When applied in the classroom, especially when a student is learning new material, it can reinforce the student's belief that they can succeed. It can also help to encourage a student developing grit. However, be forewarned that some kids find this behavioral approach, using charts, happy faces, tokens, and tangible rewards and incentives, manipulative and controlling and even disingenuous! In other words, it is worth experimenting with, but it doesn't always work and can, in fact, backfire!

**Make Learning Real.** What I mean here is help the youngster find personal meaning and value in the learning material. This is another of those universal motivational strategies. It works for almost all kids, across the globe. If we hope to encourage and inspire intrinsic motivation – a virtuous and noble goal for all students – then teachers should create learning activities that are clearly relevant and meaningful to the students in the class. Ways to help make this happen include infusing local examples, current events, and pop culture into the curriculum and classroom activities. A quote from my recently published book underscores this point: "...if we hope to reach the uninspired, the unmotivated, the bored student, then educators must connect the subject matter that they are teaching with their students' personal interests and the actual world that they live in outside of the classroom."

**Build Relationships with Your Students.** This is another universal motivational strategy; it works for all kids, of all ages, and is especially powerful in helping re-ignite

the motivational flame. Connecting with a student who is unmotivated or turned off by school on a personal level can oftentimes create a sometimes substantial, almost magical, shift in how the student views you as an adult and authority figure. I know firsthand from my experience as a therapist that children and adolescents who believe that an adult respects, cares for, and appears interested in them personally are more willing to listen to them. Of course, this same motivational principle holds for parents. Taking the time to really listen to your child's reasons for their expressed boredom, frustration, criticism and disapproval of school, school work or their teacher helps build a trusting, deep and caring relationship. I've found that even the most disenfranchised and angry student is willing to at least listen to an adult who the student perceives as caring and noncritical.

**Make Homework Assignments Enjoyable, Challenging, and Creative.** This is one of those no-brainer recommendations! Try to assign work that is stimulating and encourages the student to be innovative, creative, think 'outside the box.' Of course, some assignments need to be rote and are not terribly enjoyable – the same was true when I observed the training of elite World Class soccer players. But the best and most successful coaches mix the tedious and painful drills with fun training exercises.

**Be Excessively Enthusiastic about What You're Teaching.** I encourage teachers who ask me how to increase motivation to think about ways to 'spread enthusiasm like a virus' in the classroom. The best teachers, at all grades, are contagiously excited about what they're teaching. This isn't, of course, an antidote to low motivation, but it certainly helps ramp-up the level of excitement in the classroom.

**Give Early, Concrete, and Immediate Feedback.** This is one of those motivational recommendations borrowed from principles of learning theory. Kids learn best, and are less likely to become frustrated learning new material, if they are provided clear comments about their work – not about the student. Especially if the feedback is negative or corrective, it has a better chance of being 'heard' by the student if it is specific and focuses on the task.

**Ask Students What Makes their Best Classes "Most Motivating" and Steal Some of these Ideas.** In my college classes, I ask my students what makes the best classes that they've taken 'most motivating' and then see if I can apply some of these ideas to my class. I've pocketed a few great motivational ideas over the years that other professors have used in their classes with apparent great success!

**Emphasize Mastery and Learning and De-Emphasize Grades and Performance.** Grades are important, of course. But the pendulum has swung way too far in the direction of over-emphasizing performance. This is true in America today and in many other countries that I have visited. Parents and schools both need to place greater importance on mastery and the love of inquiry and the learning process. Grades and goals and performance standards are important. ...Very important. But at least equally important is nurturing a passion and respect for inquiry and mastery.

**Limit Excessive or Intensive Competition.** Competition, like grades and performance outcomes, is important and part of the fabric of our culture. But excessive academic

competition and competition that occurs too early in the talent development process, and that doesn't focus at all on effort but only on winners (and losers), will dampen if not extinguish the motivational flame for many students.

Create "Learning Contracts." There is some research that suggests that learning agreements or 'contracts' with unmotivated students can help create a new spark to ignite the motivational flame. I caution parents and teachers that learning contracts, like other behavioral techniques, are effective with some, but not all unmotivated students. This is another of those non-universal motivational strategies.

Provide Student Options and Choices that Encourage Autonomy. Students are individuals. We sometimes forget that. All individuals value and appreciate options and choices, including young children. Of course, the amount of options and choices, and how frequently we provide these alternatives, should match the child's level of developmental maturity. Older students, and more mature and responsible students, should be afforded more freedom and more decisions in their learning.

Identify Mentors in the Community as Role Models. The last recommendation in my baker's dozen is one that the gifted field has found effective as a motivational technique. It is also a bit tricky to arrange and not without logistical and even ethical challenges. That said, the idea is to identify role models in the community who are willing to spend time with unmotivated students. Two examples from my counseling practice: an unmotivated 5th grade male student from a single parent home responded favorably to an honor's student-athlete from the neighboring high school who was willing to help him with his school work two evenings each week and spent time on weekends hanging out, and a bored but otherwise bright 9th grader got her motivational pilot re-lit after an attorney in a small law practice in our community agreed to let her help out around the office (and provided time to discuss law and his cases with the student).