



Helping kids get work done when they just don't want to



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On this week's Raising Good Humans podcast, I'm joined by my friend and colleague Dr. Lisa Damour to talk about all things "motivation". **So much came up that I want to make sure it is clear and actionable for all of us.**

Let's start by figuring out what all this talk about intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation means. **Intrinsic motivation essentially means you do something because your heart is in it.** You do work for work's sake, without caring about reward. **Extrinsic motivation means you do work for a reward, like a grade, a gift, or to avoid punishment.** What is so important is that we understand that we are all BOTH intrinsically and extrinsically motivated at different times or even at the same time.

For those of us who LOVE something, we can admit we have days when we just don't want to do it. And those of us who don't feel motivated by school may have something else they feel passionate about.

This is a healthier way to approach motivation for our kids. One light bulb moment for me was discovering that even people who appear highly motivated and successful are sometimes just going through the motions to get things done. We can't always do things for pleasure, and we can't expect our children to do so either!

Instead of feeling guilt and shame about what motivates us, let's flip the conversation to acknowledge that we sometimes need intrinsic, sometimes extrinsic, and sometimes we need both to get what we need done.

We also talked about how our current messages about motivation are confusing. We say we value intrinsic motivation and yet, that is not the full picture. Schools often talk about and reward grades, but then also tell students not to obsess or become perfectionists about their performance. It is hard to have both and it is important to acknowledge that we know there are mixed messages. Parents also avoid praising outcomes and efforts which, for motivating kids to have internal drive, is a wonderful strategy, but when taken to an extreme may accidentally overlook (like I did) that some high-achieving, intrinsically motivated kids may want to be recognized for their effort and accomplishments too. There isn't one way to do it.

Learning how to build good habits and be successful in school is critical in the elementary and early middle school years.

This is when kids are learning strategies on how to study; where and how to do homework; and what they need to become a kid who does their work, even when they don't want to. We know from research that figuring out how to do that is correlated with higher academic and personal outcomes than intelligence alone. To do this, we can start having conversations about what our children need to be successful and focus on helping them to find that early on.

A few ideas?

- Offer to sit with your child while they do homework and keep them company. Maybe you're working on your laptop, or reading a book. You're not hovering or inserting yourself, just offering a companion to sit with them.
- Use timers to help them sprint and relax.
- Take breaks. Offer snack time as a break or ask what would be a nice break for them.
- Ask your children to come up with ideas to keep them focused, like doing work on Facetime with a friend, or listening to classical music, and see how creative they can be.

One other concept we touched on is letting our kids have the space to vent about school. So often, parents mistake their children's whining or complaints at the end of the day as a problem they have to fix, or an issue their child is having at school. But most children are going to have some

complaints about school. So giving our children 5 minutes to tell us about it, and responding with empathy and support, can help them to get those feelings out and get back to focusing. After the 5 or 10 min rant you can help them contain their venting and move on with their day.

This connects with the importance of acknowledging that even highly motivated kids are NOT motivated all the time. We don't need them to pretend (to themselves or to us) that they love work all the time, or that they aren't motivated when things feel hard or frustrating. Instead, we need to validate that, share our own experiences, and make them feel accepted for the natural feelings we all share.

What about the kids who are working SUPER hard, persisting, and still not getting the reward of success in school?

We need to think about these kids. Many of us have promoted a growth mindset where we tell them to keep working, to try again and again (and again). That makes sense and is great advice. But we have to acknowledge that for some children, school as it is currently designed isn't the right fit for how their brain thrives, and no amount of hard work and effort is going to gain them the accolades that they see their peers receive (whether it is grades or other recognition). It is also so hard for those kids to watch others gain success with ease, and to know and feel like they have to move mountains for a lesser result. These children need our support - both in acknowledging their reality and figuring out how to help them to navigate a framework that may not play to their abilities, and in finding places outside of school where they can feel success and satisfaction. We also need to figure out how to praise them for their hard work AND acknowledge that it isn't always getting them further. That hurts, and we can feel it with them. It's also important to note that all children should understand that there are always going to be stronger, smarter, faster kids in front of them. That will always be true. The goal isn't always to meet them or surpass those kids, but just to grow in their direction. And that may be good enough for all of us.

I'm happy you were motivated to read this article, and I'm excited for the next conversation!

Warmly,

Aliza