



How parents can increase motivation and confidence in children Part 1 Andrew Fuller

Motivation is a slippery customer. Just when you want to rely on it, it puts its feet up, takes a few days off & generally wants to be about as active as a sloth on long service leave. Your 'get up & go' has 'got up & gone'.

▲ Brief History of Motivation

Twenty years ago, our understanding of motivation was pretty straightforward. People had drives & needs & conducted cost benefit analyses & depending on the balance sheet either were motivated or lay around doing as little as possible.

Related to this was the idea of 'flow', identified by the wonderfully named, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, where people become absorbed in an effortless Zen-like zone.

This led to the idea of pep talks, goal setting or searching for activities that created flow. You may have been on the receiving end of one of these pep talks from your own parents.

The problem was they worked only part of the time. Children don't behave like budding economists & states of Zen-like flow are hard to regularly create.

More recently we identified the missing ingredient in motivation –the neurochemical, dopamine.

Why Motivation matters (a lot) to Parents & Children

Parents & young people undertake one of the most ambitious missions known to humanity. People find it hard to push themselves to do difficult things & find it even harder to continually push themselves to improve over time.

Gaining a useful understanding of how brains learn & how to increase dopamine & motivation, is among the most useful pieces of knowledge parents can have.

Dancing with Dopamine

Neuropsychological research has regularly shown that higher levels of dopamine are related to motivation.

Essentially there are two aspects of the dopamine circuit.

1.The Seeking system Dopamine is increased when we anticipate good things & seek out something new.

People are on the hunt for new stuff all the time. Social media is a great example of this. It provides new ideas & also new social approval. It is also why we are fascinated by gossip & the news.

Dopamine is also the neurochemical of desire. Desire starts to exist when we believe that by doing something will result in pleasure, fulfillment, or satisfaction.

Dopamine is more about *wanting* than having whereas serotonin is more about *having* than wanting. When we feel excited or anticipate a good event, dopamine increases 30 - 40 times.

2. Reward system Dopamine also increases when we experience little 'wins', when tasks are completed, when we can tick things off a check list or to-do list, or when personal goals are achieved.

Much of your ancestors' exploration was driven by dopamine. For example, *'let's go & check out what's happening over there' & 'those people over there, look interesting'*.

Neurocraving

Neuro-craving is when your brain desires an outcome &, when it is finally achieved, your brain gives you a 'hit' of dopamine. One example is cleverly arranged into music. Great songs create a tension in the listener that is resolved when a missing chord or note is sounded. The listener gets a hit of dopamine & wants to hear the song again.

You can increase dopamine through small changes in what you and your child do, with rapid & long-lasting results. Knowing how to leverage dopamine creates a substantial 40% advantage in motivation.

The first way to develop a dopamine *'want'* is to identify the 'edge', the new aspect of whatever you are learning or doing. If you can find something that intrigues your child, you've already increased their levels of motivation.

Just thinking about what we want increases motivation by 50%. Writing down our goals increases it even more.

Computer games are exquisitely designed to keep players entranced & on a dopamine edge. However, after played for an extended period, most gamers are washed out.

Learn to spike dopamine by making the effort & the progress your child makes towards an outcome into a challenge. Taking on challenges where your child has a likelihood of success builds motivation. This requires opting in rather than opting out. Focusing on the little goals along the way keeps dopamine flowing.

Downsides of Dopamine

With dopamine there are no peaks without troughs. Many athletes have a glum period after winning a championship & musicians often find the time that they get home after a successful tour to be difficult.

If we tap into a reliable source of dopamine we tend to become obsessed with it. Look at the way people use phones, social media & computer games..

We all need to be careful to vary our sources of dopamine because tapping into the same source repeatedly becomes a habit over time & risks turning into a raging addiction.

Having high levels of dopamine feels great but it also resets our baseline for what we consider to be fun & pleasurable. Help your child to appreciate the small things in life as well as the big wins.

If we seek out dopamine at high levels too much, we invite gloomy despondency into our lives.

The great 'high' of dopamine is that we feel pumped but when the dopamine lessens or the source becomes unavailable for a time, we slump & find life dull & meaningless.

The Greek poet Hesiod was on to this when he suggested, *'all things in moderation'*.

A subtle but nasty downside of dopamine is that for every bit of dopamine that's increased, there's a crash associated when prolactin is released in your brain (yes, this is the same hormone that stimulates milk production during breast feeding). Prolactin is behind the feeling of letdowns after a big goal has been achieved. Celebrate your child's wins & victories briefly & then use that energy to shift to working towards the next step.

Managing Dopamine for parents (a starter kit)

A full discussion of this takes an hour to present but let's cover some of the basics.

Parents can regulate dopamine schedules to optimise engagement, motivation & learning.

This doesn't involve convincing, persuading, or cajoling children to be motivated or providing hearty pep talks.

Regulating dopamine in families involves creating the optimal conditions for dopamine to rise & fall over a day.

In the morning make your home brightly lit. Put music on if you want. If you can, eat breakfast outdoors if you have a back veranda or patio or in a sunny room.

First thing in the morning is rarely the best time for a long discussion by parents about progress at school as some children and almost all teens will be grumpy & incommunicative.

Try to minimise screen time early on (*I know this is hard*) otherwise they 'zombie- out.'

Instead ritualise the start of the day with one of two options:

1. If they seem really sluggish, solo activities for the first 5 to 10 minutes such as having them create a list of activities to do or foods to eat later in the day. You may need to prompt & guide some children.

2. If they seem more switched on, begin with activities where everyone is involved & no one gets anything wrong. Funny quizzes, jokes, sharing weird facts or playing 20 questions over breakfast can help.

You can feel when children's dopamine declines, the energy leaves the room.

Let your children know that you think they are smart & as a member of a clever switched-on family who know how to have fun, they are going to get even smarter.

Incorporating some physical movements especially rhythmic movements (walking, singing, dancing, shooting goals in basketball) increases dopamine.

Each day has a rhythm with predictable peaks & troughs of energy, learning & dopamine. Scheduling can capitalise on this to maximise learning outcomes and harmony in your home.

In part 2 of this series on motivation, I will turn more directly to practical actionable strategies parents can use to increase dopamine & raise confidence in your kids..

More information

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Learning Strengths

Books for Parents

Unlocking Your Child's Genius
Tricky Behaviours
The A to Z of Feelings

Books for Teachers

Guerrilla Tactics for Teachers
Tricky Conversations
Unlocking Your Child's Genius
*Neurodevelopmental Differentiation-
Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise
Learning (Amba press)*

