

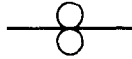
EAGER^{TO} LEARN



Helping Children Become
Motivated and Love Learning

Raymond J. Wlodkowski and Judith H. Jaynes

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HELPING CHILDREN BECOME MOTIVATED
AND LOVE LEARNING

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Helping Children Become Motivated and Love Learning

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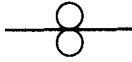
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Preface



CURRENTLY, APPROXIMATELY 27 percent of all children in the United States drop out of public school before high school graduation. This troublesome percentage is approaching nearly one out of two students among our ethnic poor. Every teacher knows numerous students who are capable of learning to a far greater extent than they actually do. Since 1980, more than a dozen reports from national panels and commissions that have studied public education in this country agree that the school achievement of our children is below their abilities. In all of these instances, one of the main reasons cited is that many of our children lack motivation to learn in school.

Other national studies that have examined teacher alienation and dissatisfaction report “poor student attitude toward learning” as a major reason for both the physical and psychological withdrawal of teachers from their profession. Recruiting new and able teachers has also suffered because of the appraisal of many college students who see teaching as a difficult career in which one has to work with far too many students who do not want to learn.

Within this dismal picture stand the parents who know only too well the struggle and frequent defeat of trying to make a son or daughter learn. Despite constant badgering and numerous threats, parents end up with disappointing report cards and the very real worry that they are raising a child who does not have the attitude or

the skills and knowledge to gain a satisfying life in a very difficult world. All of this often occurs with one more nagging rumination: "What a waste! I should do better. If only I could help my child to work a little harder."

Purpose and Audience

Eager to Learn is a direct attempt to help teachers and parents find realistic ways to help children become motivated to learn. It contains a series of ideas and methods that directly address how to help children to *want* to learn in school, to persevere at learning tasks, to value learning, and to enjoy learning. Whenever possible, this book offers ways to develop in children an intrinsic motivation for learning, which is to find learning itself to be a rewarding activity. We suggest ways to make learning satisfying in all of its aspects, from classwork to doing homework, studying, and even taking tests.

This is the first book of its kind written for both parents and teachers. As Dorothy Rich (*The Forgotten Factor in School Success—The Family*) has written, "The relationship between family and school is comparable to that of the right and left hemispheres of the brain. Both are necessary. Both are complementary, unique, and vital." The more parents can understand and support what teachers do, the more they can help their children. The greater the positive relationship between teachers and parents in what they say and do about children learning, the more powerful their mutual influence can be upon children. Many of the ways to encourage motivation to learn can be sensibly used in both school and home. This book unifies teachers and parents in the best interest of their children's motivation to learn. It is a book to be shared, to be given by parents to teachers and by teachers to parents.

Overview of the Contents

Addressing both parents and teachers, *Eager to Learn* discusses motivation in two parts. Part One deals with how parents and teachers can help to develop motivation to learn as a lifelong personal trait in a child. As we know, some people like to learn in general. They like learning when they are young, and they like to

learn when they are older. It appears that such people learn to enjoy learning from their parents and teachers. *Eager to Learn* demonstrates how such learning can be a part of a child's experience in today's families and schools. Part Two of this book deals with solving motivation problems. It discusses what parents and teachers can do to resolve those situations in which students will not attempt certain schoolwork because of anxiety, boredom, or lack of success. It gives specific guidance to parents and teachers to encourage student effort to succeed in school. The chapters in Part Two introduce such skills as problem solving, goal setting, and other strategies that children can use when they want to maintain or increase their own motivation to learn. In this manner, children can learn to rely on themselves as a resource to increase their interest, sense of challenge, or means of gaining more rewarding outcomes.

Because our goal in this book is to communicate with the general population, *Eager to Learn* avoids scholarly jargon and uses direct and descriptive language. Because so much of the book deals with family relations that are strongly influenced by ethnic values, the examples offered are oriented toward the mainstream with the understanding that families and teachers will have to add their own cultural and socioeconomic shadings. Although this book attempts to make the complex topic of motivation clear, it is not a clinical manual designed for helping children with motivational problems stemming from chemical or physical abuse, emotional trauma, or family dysfunction.

Eager to Learn represents our years of experience as parents, teachers, and therapists over the past three decades. Everything we have written has been filtered through each of these three roles and found acceptable. Thus anything we recommend for parents we can also accept as teachers and as therapists, and anything we recommend to teachers we can also accept as parents and as therapists. However, we need to say that no one should take any of our recommendations as an absolute. Motivation to learn is a relatively new field of study in which factual knowledge is difficult to offer with complete certainty. In addition, every child, every teacher, and every parent is unique. Our readers must trust their own judgment re-

garding the advice we offer. Use it only as it seems reasonable and acceptable to you.

Eager to Learn is for parents and teachers who want to help children and adolescents become motivated and effective learners—people who can learn, who value learning, and who normally find it an enjoyable experience. This book offers parents and teachers a common language and understanding so that they can cooperatively work toward this goal. We discuss motivation as a lifelong trait that can be developed, as well as a specific process that can be increased in particular learning situations. *Eager to Learn* provides a problem-solving approach to situations in which motivation seems to be lacking. It offers concrete, practical suggestions that trust the final judgment of parents and teachers for their application. It is a book that does not treat “love of learning” as a wish or a mere platitude but as a realistic goal that families and schools can reach together.

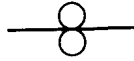
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Seattle, Washington
November 1989

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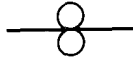
Wlodkowski is a licensed psychologist and certified school psychologist with experience as a family therapist. He is a consultant to national and international organizations, including the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, AT&T Communications, and the East Asia Regional Council of Overseas Schools. He is the author of *Motivation and Teaching: A Practical Guide* (1978) and *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn* (1985), which received the Phillip E. Frandson Award for Literature. His professional interests and publications are primarily in the areas of human development, instruction, and motivation. He has received the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Award for Teaching Excellence.

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Jaynes is the coauthor (with C. Rugg) of *Adolescents, Alcohol, and Drugs: A Practical Guide for Those Who Work with Young People* (1988). She has made presentations at professional conferences, both national and international, and she has worked as a consultant to schools and social service agencies throughout the United States. Her professional career has included work as an elementary school teacher, a parent education instructor, and director of a number of early childhood education programs.

Contents



Preface	xi
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The Authors	xv
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Part One: How Children Become Motivated to Learn

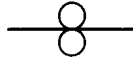
1. Motivation: The Key to Learning	3
2. Family, School, Culture: Powerful Influences	12
3. Eagerness to Learn: Cultivating the Desire	23
4. Grades, Homework, and Television: Thorny Concerns	40

Part Two: How to Support a Child's Learning and Solve Motivational Problems

5. Building a Positive Parent-Teacher Relationship	55
6. Fostering Success in Learning	66

x	Contents
7. Reducing Anxiety Over Tests and Grades	75
8. Overcoming Boredom and Indifference	85
9. Encouraging Effort and Perseverance	99
Epilogue: Creating Friendship Between a Child and Learning	114
Resources	
A. Teacher Questions for Parents	119
B. Parent Questions for Teachers	121
C. Parent Worksheet to Prepare for Parent-Teacher Conference	123
D. Parent Checklist for Conferencing with a Child's Teacher	124
E. Narrative Pupil Progress Report	126
F. Student Interest Survey: A Tool for Teachers	127
Annotated References	129
Index	143

Part I



How Children Become Motivated to Learn

IS THE IDEA OF A human passion for learning a myth—something society keeps alive as a hope offered to make its schools less dreary and its parents more obliging? We do not think so. Watch a toddler opening a box. Listen to the questions of young children on their first trip to a zoo. Talk with someone about a favorite hobby. Think of all the things you still want to learn. People undertake about eight new learning activities a year.¹ Whether it is finding a better recipe or participating in a job-related workshop, learning is a constant in our lives.

Then there are those people who are obviously more enamored with learning—and they are not all scientists and scholars. They include the trivia buffs, the sports junkies, the reading addicts, and the health nuts; as the labels suggest, they are crazy about learning.

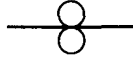
The problem is making learning a constant in educational institutions. Our media bombard us daily with the bad news about higher dropout rates, lower math scores, and greater numbers of children learning less than ever before. Our national concern rises in the face of international competition and the reality that the type of learning that occurs in school—the three R's as well as thinking and problem solving—no longer stops with high school graduation. It continues on the job and in the home. With rapid techno-

logical changes and amounts of information progressing exponentially, academic learning will be a way of life in the twenty-first century.

As parents and educators, we are responsible for helping our children to develop motivation to learn that lasts a lifetime and embraces academic learning. This is a complex process for which there are no fixed menus or simple blueprints. But there is information, research, and wisdom about these matters. Because motivation is a relatively recent topic for investigation, the formal knowledge about it can be compared to the first maps describing a new territory. They lead the way, but they are not necessarily complete and may not offer the best routes. Yet anyone who is serious about having a successful journey is bound to study them well beforehand.

The first part of this book represents what we have found to be the most informed and enlightened thinking about what motivation to learn is and how it can be developed in children. The research and ideas we discuss offer a context and conceptual framework for the more practical methods offered in Part Two of this book. By understanding how the culture, the school, the family, and the child form a system of motivational influences, we can be more aware, at every level of society, of how to help children to be both joyful and productive in schools.

Chapter 1



Motivation: The Key to Learning

The most important motive for work in the school and in life is the pleasure in work, pleasure in its result and the knowledge of the value of the result to the community.

—Albert Einstein

JEFF'S PARENTS WERE CONSUMED by the delight they had with him as a baby. Never before had watching anyone or anything been so wonderful for them. They followed and celebrated every step of his development with gasps, and applause, and the sure snap of their camera's shutter. His first smile, his first word, and his first step were history-making moments within their family.

Their life with Jeff seemed only to get better as he grew older. His brightness and curiosity as a toddler flowed and merged with their insatiable wonder at his achievements. As a preschooler Jeff was confident and skillful. He could read neighborhood signs with ease, complete commercial jingles on cue, and point out what he called his "favorite words" in any number of books. People told Jeff's parents to have him tested by a psychologist because he seemed so gifted and they should know what his special talents might be. But they did not do this. They wanted Jeff's life to be as normal and as natural as possible. They were grateful for their little boy and felt lucky to be graced with his happy childhood. They knew plenty of parents whose lives with their children were difficult at best. "Let's not tamper with something when it's working," they reassured one another.

Jeff entered elementary school like a sturdy ship setting off on a smooth sea. He was sure of himself. He made friends easily. He did well in all subjects. His teachers liked him. Jeff's parents looked forward to parent-teacher conferences. They were like small meetings of a mutual admiration society. Everyone thought everyone else was wonderful. There were some criticisms now and then—tardy homework, careless spelling, messy handwriting—but nothing really serious, nothing more than the necessary refinements of a good student.

It was not until the sixth grade that Jeff's parents felt their first twinge of a definite threat to their son's motivation to learn in school. Jeff received his first D on a report card. It was in math. His parents were upset. They talked with each other about it before they talked with Jeff. Maybe Jeff was slacking. Maybe it was a fluke. Maybe they weren't paying enough attention to Jeff's schoolwork. Maybe their son wasn't capable in math. Maybe it was a poor teacher. Jeff told them he didn't like math. It was boring and the teacher was a tough grader.

When Jeff's parents went to see his math teacher, Ms. Bartlett, they were a little anxious. She was friendly but seemed tired and abrupt. Yes, Jeff could do better. Yes, he was capable. His problem was that he was not concentrating and that he was not completing his homework. The parents did not argue with the teacher. Neither of them voiced a nagging doubt that maybe Ms. Bartlett was not making the subject interesting for their son. When they later confided this to one another, they admitted they felt uncomfortable and didn't know how to say it without starting a fight. They did tell Jeff he had to shape up in math and get all his work done for the class. Jeff didn't argue. He seemed resigned to obey them but with a sullenness they had not before seen in him. For the rest of the year he received C's in math.

Now, in the ninth grade, Jeff's schoolwork has taken a real tumble. He has started getting F's for the first time. His parents have become adept at arguing with teachers. They can say what is bothering them, but this does not seem to help the situation. The teachers do not seem to change and neither do Jeff's parents. In fact, a predictable pattern has emerged. As each side complains to the other,

both sides seem to lose confidence in helping Jeff and trusting one another.

In the meantime, learning in school has become a kind of tug-of-war between Jeff and his parents. They pull him in to learning by threatening and badgering him. This forces him temporarily to do better in his schoolwork and his grades rise slightly. However, when his parents ease the pressure, he seems to slide back a bit further from his studies. In fact, he is interested in almost anything but schoolwork—friends, television, sports, music, and any number of other distractions. Jeff's parents do not like pressuring their son. They realize they are winning hollow victories. They know that the older their son gets, the less they can coerce him into learning. It is agonizing for them to remember Jeff as a young child, so eager to learn, so motivated in school. They worry. They still believe there must be a way. They haven't given up.

We begin this book with this unsettling story because although it may not exactly represent any student, or family, or teacher, it contains many of the common elements and inevitable questions that make children's motivation to learn in school worrisome for well-intentioned parents and teachers. Let us more directly list some of these factors:

- Why do most children seem so curious and motivated to learn when they are very young, but seem to lose their passion for learning as they grow older and progress through school?
- Why do parents who care for their children and offer them stable and loving homes often have problems with maintaining the motivation of their children to learn?
- Because we know so much about learning, why have we not created some formula or plan to rear children in a way that will help them love to learn throughout their lives?
- Why do most children seem less motivated to learn math and science than other subjects in school?
- Should we force our children to learn if we believe that is best for them?
- Why are television programs and sports, often presented in a simple-minded fashion, so appealing to people?

- Who have a greater influence on children's motivation to learn—parents or teachers?
- How can teachers be trained to know how to motivate children to learn what they are teaching?
- How can parents and teachers work more effectively together to help children to want to learn?
- How can motivation to learn the subjects taught in school be restored or rejuvenated in young people who no longer seem to care?

Many of the answers to these questions are essential to providing a better education for our children. Yet there are no short, simple, or unqualified responses. The rest of this book is our answer. To begin, we can ask, What is motivation to learn and why is it so important?

In the broadest sense, motivation to learn is a value and a desire for learning. This understanding is the platform for the main goal of this book: *to help children value learning*. This means the child is not only willing to learn but also cherishes and enjoys the act of learning, as well as the outcome of learning. This can occur inside or outside of school. In this sense, the child likes the solving of the math problem as much as the achievement of the correct solution or appreciates the process of writing a composition as much as any grade it might be given.

The child who values learning is truly gifted because that child is becoming a lifelong learner. This is a child who is attracted to reading, writing, thinking, calculating, and problem solving. This student has a natural bent to do those things that will lead to occupational success in the twenty-first century and contribute to the positive evolution of society. Such a student becomes an adult who is often capable of excellence because the best in science, scholarship, or art cannot be coerced from an unwilling mind or heart.

This kind of learner is graced with a perspective that makes the difficult desirable; this is the true benefit of motivation to learn. Learning is often extremely difficult and risky. We may not be able to learn something well, and we often do not know this until we have tried for some time without success. However, this pattern of futile attempts and excessive effort also often precedes great discov-