

Motivating Kids with External Rewards

How to teach self-discipline.

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Does your child struggle to get through one chapter of a textbook, but can sit down and read a whole comic book?

It seems paradoxical that children with ADHD can do things that interest them but can't stick with other things, like homework. Such behavior may suggest that the child is being willfully disobedient, or that a lack of discipline and poor motivation are the problems.

But this behavior is neither willful nor the result of poor parenting.



ADHD is not just a disorder of attention, excess activity, or poor impulse control, though these features usually are the most conspicuous. Underneath lurks a more profound disorder in mental mechanisms that give humans the capacity for self-regulation.

ADHD disrupts a person's ability to manage their own behavior and act with future consequences in mind. That's why kids with ADHD are at their worst when tasks must be done that have no immediate payoff or reinforcement, but are necessary because the future outcome is important.

Underlying our capacity for self-regulation is self-motivation — that intrinsic drive to achieve our goals, even in the face of boredom or adversity. Goal-directed, future-oriented behavior demands that we be able to motivate ourselves internally, which is often described as willpower, self-discipline, ambition, persistence, determination or drive. ADHD disrupts this mental mechanism, leaving those with the disorder “low on fuel” in motivating behavior toward future rewards.

If a task in itself provides motivation (such as video games, comic books, or TV) they have little or no problem sticking with it — but that's because the activity contains its own rewards. Give these kids a task where there is no external reinforcement or payoff, and their persistence falls apart. They can't sustain attention, skip from one uncompleted activity to another, and get bored very quickly and easily.

Therefore, to help a child with ADHD complete work when there is little immediate reward or interest in the task, adults must establish artificial rewards to help sustain their motivation. That's why token systems, chip programs, or other external rewards help kids with ADHD persist. Without these rewards, kids with ADHD cannot themselves create the intrinsic willpower they need to stick with the task.