

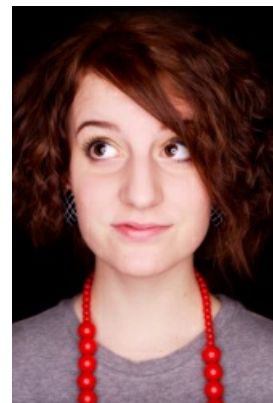
Motivating the Low-Achieving Teen

For some teens, school doesn't come easy. The sources of the problem are varied—some struggle with a learning disability, while others may be challenged by substance abuse or a simple lack of motivation. But, regardless of the cause, parents want to know one thing: is it possible to turn struggling students around?

Anne Messersmith, former addiction specialist with the Interagency Drug Abuse Recovery Program in Los Angeles, believes it is. "The only way to change these kids is to build their self-esteem," she says.

For many kids, the issue isn't their intelligence, it's their intrinsic motivation, according to Beth Larsen, a high school resource instructor. "Teenagers aren't motivated by the same external rewards as younger children," she explains. "The best motivation comes from inside." Like Larsen, Messersmith also believes that kids need to recognize their own potential in order to succeed. "You have to ask them what they want in life. What are their dreams? Help them reflect back to what their hopes and dreams were when they were children and go from there," she says.

Teens need to clearly see their goals, whether it's graduating from high school, going to college, or just passing the next big test. But kids who struggle with school cannot be expected to reach their goals alone. They need support from both parents and teachers. Below are six ways to motivate struggling teens to stay on task:



1. **Pay Attention.** Parents often assume that teens do not need the same amount of attention they received when they were younger. But nothing could be further from the truth. "The most motivated students," says Larsen, "are those whose parents sit with them during homework and do not ignore problems until it's too late."
2. **Communicate.** Parents should be aware of what is going on at school and what assignments their children have been given. Larsen advises parents to communicate regularly with teachers about their child's progress. "Teachers want your child to succeed as much as you do."
3. **Don't Make Excuses.** Sometimes parents enable their kid's poor performance in school by laying the blame on that child's disability or situation. Instead, parents ought to expect teens to be responsible for their own education, while keeping such expectations reasonable. "Parents should also set the example for their kids," says Messersmith. "No double standards."
4. **Recognize Achievements.** For teens who struggle in school, even the slightest improvement is an achievement. Praise your child for his efforts. Receiving recognition for accomplishments is a great motivator.
5. **Celebrate Strengths.** "We all have different abilities," says Larsen. "Parents can motivate their teens to succeed by focusing on their strengths and helping them improve on their weaknesses."
6. **Never Give Up.** High school students who face academic challenges can sometimes feel like throwing in the towel. But with the love and support of their parents and teachers, even the most frustrated teen can set and meet goals. "It's so much easier to give up," says Messersmith, "but don't get discouraged. Stand your ground." The key, as Larsen reminds us, "is to never settle, but also don't have crazy, unreachable goals." In other words, set realistic goals and never stop helping your child attain them.