

Tips for Motivating Struggling Students

There is nothing more demoralizing than a child who is unresponsive to a tutoring session you have planned with care and enthusiasm. Whether the child is apathetic or argumentative, your personal feelings might run the gamut from frustration, to disappointment, to anger, to insecurity over whether you are even cut out for the job. Even the most seasoned classroom teachers feel this way on a tough day.

Remember two things: 1) All kids want to learn, and 2) you are most likely working with children who struggle to keep up in school and are disheartened by this experience. Sometimes they respond to this struggle by finding ways to avoid the work: clowning around; engaging in distracting conversation; not following instructions; putting little or no effort into the task. If you connect with these children and help them to feel safe in the tutoring environment, they will usually open up to you and respond to your efforts. It is up to you to seek connections that work. There are many ways to motivate a seemingly disinterested tutee.

Set ground rules for behavior with your tutee. Remember, however, that the child's school or after-school setting has already established expectations and routines for behavior management. You can support the child and reinforce positive behavior in your sessions more effectively when you take an approach that is similar to his or her other learning environments. Often, the student will be accustomed to certain parameters, such as: times and procedures for use of the bathroom and water fountain; raising one's hand to speak in a group; locations where snacks and beverages are not allowed. Connect with the child's teacher or out-of-school time program coordinator to learn about these routines. Drawing strength from and aligning yourself with these established ground rules will increase your credibility with the child and help prevent discrepancies, which can confuse the child or make it possible for him or her to take advantage of them in your time together.

Most of the suggestions here are most appropriate for elementary school students. For information on motivating reluctant adolescents, call LEARNS or visit: www.nwrel.org/learns/tutor/win2000/index.html.

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Upon first encounter, a child is often wary of a new adult. Whether you are to have an ongoing relationship with this child or a one-time meeting, establishing a comfortable connection and helping the child feel safe is a priority.

□ Encourage conversation with your tutee

Get the child talking and show your interest in what he has to say. The more open-ended a question is, the easier it will be to continue the conversation. Some openers include:

- *I bet your teacher reads stories to your class. One of my favorites is The Cat in the Hat. What are some of your favorite stories?*
- *I love animals. My favorite is the cheetah because it can run very fast. Which animals do you like?*
- *I know lots of kids watch television. Tell me about some TV shows that you like to watch.*

It will be very difficult for even the most unresponsive child to not reply to these comments and questions. Remember that a conversation is an exchange between people. Offer your ideas but focus most on what the child says. The goal is to encourage the child to speak. A good way to do this is to say, *That's interesting—tell me more.*

□ Be open-minded rather than judgmental

Many children are accustomed to the scrutiny of parents and teachers and often feel inadequate or nervous as a result. Make it clear that you are there to help and that you celebrate and respect the child's efforts. If she draws something, share your observations and questions without criticizing. For example:

- *I see that you used lots of different colors to make the leaves of the tree.*
- *You used interesting shapes to make the jungle gym.*
- *What's that on the grass, near the flowers?*

□ Recognize that everyone makes mistakes

Children often feel that they must perform perfectly. This can cause additional stress and get in the way of learning. Acknowledge when you make a mistake to show that it's okay. Reassure your tutee so she knows it's normal for all adults and children to make mistakes.

□ Gently but firmly make it clear that you are in charge

Children need clearly defined and consistent expectations to feel safe. You can assert your leadership without being harsh or intimidating. Keep instructions short and simple, but follow up on what you say so the child knows you're serious and attentive. Express your desire to help the child learn and explain that it's necessary to follow certain routines together in order to make progress.

Using Effective Language

Your choice of words impacts a child's feelings and behavior. As you establish and maintain your role as an authority figure, it's especially important to speak in positive terms and remain sensitive to the student's feelings and experiences. Here is a list of helpful language for situations that often arise during tutoring sessions.

□ **When kids refuse to engage: Connecting with your tutee**

There are a number of reasons why a child may be uncommunicative. He might resent having to do extra work; he may be frustrated by not being able to understand the work on his level; or he may be in a bad mood. It's not necessarily your job to discover why he is refusing to engage, but it is important to acknowledge the way the child feels before moving on with a lesson.

- *It seems as though you're not very interested in being here. Where would you rather be?*
- *The way you're sitting makes me think you're angry at something or someone. What can I do to help?*
- *It seems like you're not really in the mood to do our work today. Sometimes it helps people to talk about what's bothering them.*
- *Did something happen in school today?*
- *It is not okay to sit there and do nothing during this time. Either you let me know what's wrong or you take a big breath and we begin work. Your choice.*

In extreme cases where the child is defiantly refusing to cooperate, especially over more than one session, consult your supervisor. In this case, tell the child what's happening: *It's not okay for you to sit here each session and not do anything. Let's go talk to _____ together.*

□ **Praise that reinforces positive work: Using words beyond *Good job***

When praising a child, explicitly stating what he did to receive merit will affirm and reinforce the skill or behavior. For example:

- *I noticed you corrected yourself when you realized that sentence didn't make sense. Good readers are always checking to make sure their reading makes sense.*
- *I see you looking at the pictures to help you make a prediction about what will happen next. That's a great strategy.*
- *Nice job sounding out _____!*
- *You're asking smart questions about the story.*
- *I can tell by the way you were reading that you were really paying attention to the punctuation.*
- *I noticed you used that new strategy we talked about. Good for you!*
- *You used to get so frustrated when you made a mistake that you stopped working. Now, you don't let a little mistake upset or distract you. Instead, you stick with the task and keep going.*

□ **Involving the student in decision-making: Offering choices**

Offering choices can establish boundaries in a pro-active way. Instead of saying what is *not* allowed, be specific about what is allowed and involve your tutee in planning your time together. Give children choices in very clear, short statements, like:

- *Would you like to begin our time today with a read aloud or a game?*
- *I see you're having a hard time concentrating on reading today. Would you like to keep trying or do you want to play the game and then go back to reading?*
- *It seems like you're having a hard time sitting still. Do you think you can calm down or would it help you to have a time out and work at another table? Your choice.*

□ **Distracted or overly active: Re-directing a child's focus and energy**

Children are easily distracted and have limited attention spans. They experience restlessness after sitting a long time or working intensely and may grow especially antsy anticipating a vacation or special event. At some point, you will have to reign your tutee back in to concentrate on the task at hand. Do not waste time berating her for this behavior. Identify the problem and then focus on what the child can do to respond appropriately. For example:

- *It seems you're having difficulty concentrating and holding a pencil. Why don't I hold the pencil so you can concentrate better?*
- *I can see you have a lot of energy today. Let's use it to get a lot of work done.*
- *You've been sitting for a while now. Why don't we do a few stretches before we continue our work?*

If necessary, try various strategies to help the student settle down and refocus. At the beginning of a session, or as a transition from one activity to the next, try something physical:

- Give the child a few minutes to stand up and stretch out.
- Play a few rounds of *Simon Says*.
- Join the child for a short walk down the hall, around the room, or to the drinking fountain.

□ **Maintaining a productive environment: Setting limits for the child**

When necessary, set limits for your tutee. These limits won't work, however, unless you are committed to them if a child crosses the line. For example:

- *If you can't control your body, we're going to have to put the game away. (Put the game away if the child still does not comply with you, no matter how much the child promises to change after the fact. This is hard to do, but it's necessary to show the child that you're serious.)*
- *You can get a drink of water when we're done.*
- *Please use the bathroom before we begin so we're not interrupted.*
- *Now is the time to finish this work.*
- *We can take a little break after we finish reading this chapter.*

□ **Pointing out the positives: Providing encouragement to your tutee**

Think and speak in positive terms. For example:

- *You got ten right!* (In contrast to, *You got only five wrong.*)
- *Let me help you.*
- *Let's try it this way.*
- *Make this little change and it will be right.*
- *You almost got it. Look again at that letter.*
- *Tell me more about _____.*
- *I can tell you are really thinking hard.*

Managing Group Work

Working in a group presents its own challenges, but many of the basic strategies and responses for working one-on-one will still apply. To the previous examples, however, you can add:

□ **When kids refuse to engage: Connecting children to one another**

When children work together, it's difficult for one to remain defiant or uncommunicative with the others. Make use of children's peer relationships to help them participate in an appropriate and productive manner.

- *Ben's having a tough time working on his own. Why don't we work in pairs today?*
- *Turn to the person next to you and take one minute to talk about _____.*
- *John, can you help Lucy find her place in the book?*
- *Rebecca, if you're having trouble answering the question, ask someone in the group for help.*

□ **Praise that reinforces positive work: Using words beyond *Good job***

As when working one-on-one with a student, it is important to be explicit when praising children in a group. Be specific about what they did to deserve the positive feedback to reinforce their acquisition of that strategy or behavior.

- *Thank you for raising your hand.*
- *I noticed you helped Melissa find her place. Thank you for helping.*
- *You're all really working together. That helps us get the work done.*
- *I can tell by the way you are listening to each other that you really respect what each person has to say.*
- *I could see that you were just bursting to share your idea, but you waited until Sean finished speaking. That shows what a respectful, good listener you are.*

□ **Decision-making with a group: Staying on task**

Though offering choices is generally a good strategy when working with kids, they may waste time arguing over a difference of opinion when working in a group setting. Since your time in each tutoring session is limited, it's much better to come to the group with a solid plan and direct the selection and sequence of activities yourself.

□ **Distracted or overly active: Re-directing a child's focus and energy**

When a child is disruptive or unfocused, identify the problem and help her overcome it. Rather than reprimand her, use language that reminds her of your expectations and give her a chance to follow your example.

- *I can see it's hard for you to work next to Amelia. Why don't you sit next to me so you'll be able to get your work done.*
- (After a child speaks out of turn in a small group...) *Did you have something to say? (yes) Will you please raise your hand? (raises hand) Oh, yes?*

□ **Maintaining a productive environment: Setting limits together**

Invite children to establish rules for group work and help them to follow the guidelines they set.

- *We need to find ways to work together so it's fair for everyone and we have time do different activities. What kinds of rules should we have so that our work goes smoothly?*
- *Looks like we're having some problems working together. Who has some ideas about what we can do to make things go more smoothly?*
- Use a "three strikes and you're out" policy, but give the child fair warning so he has a chance to correct his behavior. *You've called out twice. One more time and you'll have to leave the group and work on your own.*
- *Everyone needs to listen to Jennifer when she's speaking.*
- *I noticed how you all waited and gave time for Peter to give his answer. That really helps us hear what he has to say and it also gives us a chance to think about his idea.*