

THE MOTIVATED CHILD

Looking at the emotional factors affecting reading

Geraldine Taylor

“The motivated child is the child who has a reason for learning, is not afraid of learning, and who wants to go on learning for the rest of her life”



Geraldine Taylor is Educational Consultant to Ladybird Books. She holds a BA and an MA from Bristol University, and a Diploma in Special Education from the University of the West of England. She has led workshops on children's learning for thousands of parents in the UK and has published widely on the emotional factors affecting children's learning.

May I explain the background to my research in this area? I'm Educational Consultant to Ladybird Books¹, and I'm an English teacher with two specialist qualifications in teaching children with learning difficulties. In 1984, I wrote what became a landmark book in parental involvement: *Be Your Child's Natural Teacher*².

Writing about parental involvement is one thing, getting the message across face to face is another, and infinitely more important. I've taken hundreds of workshops for parents and teachers, worked with thousands of parents, and with professionals keen to encourage parental involvement in their schools or nursery settings.

I also come from a counselling background and my special interest is in the emotional factors affecting learning, especially reading. Now at last the importance of these factors is being acknowledged: we are hearing words like empowerment, confidence and wellbeing.

It's now being acknowledged that the emotional factors are so important for motivating lifelong learning that we must actually plan for them.

Often, it takes only a small development in our understanding, a small shift in our ways of communicating with children to make a major contribution to their motivation and well being. These small shifts can be incredibly empowering and can equip children with the attitudes to become lifelong learners. And we know that these early years are those in which the all-important attitudes to learning are formed.

The motivated child is the child who has a reason for learning, is not afraid of learning, and who wants to go on learning for the rest of her life. And we all want the children we teach to be life-long readers.

Motivation simply cannot be left to chance and this is why I have mentioned my work with parents at the outset. It seems to me essential to try to share our understanding of the emotional factors affecting learning with parents and children's carers. Encouraging motivation in children needs an all-round approach and the family is as important as the school.

Pressure

Memory plays a fundamental part in all learning and especially in learning to read. Anxiety and the stress of pressure hinders the efficient use of memory and reading is especially vulnerable.

If we understand what pressure is, we are obviously better equipped, as professionals working with young children, and as parents, to avoid it.

Put simply, pressure is when children feel that our approval, our love or liking of them depends upon their ability to perform a certain task, be it learning to tie shoelaces or learning the sounds made by the letters of the alphabet. It's also when children are compared with their friends and siblings and feel that they themselves are a disappointment.

Pressure isolates: why can't *you* do it ... but encouragement gives the lovely feeling that we're all in this learning business together: *Let's all look at this and see what we can do.*

Effective encouragement creates a supportive atmosphere in which children want to master new steps.

Effective encouragement

Effective encouragement strengthens motivation and gives courage. Giving effective encouragement is a skill we can learn, and it is a skill which will boost the confidence and motivation of the children who are learning to read with us. In essence, effective encouragement involves:

- concentrating on the individual child's achievements without comparison with their peers.
- finding something to praise in every child's efforts, and understanding that the praise of detail is the key to progress in reading (and in any other skill). *You read that page very well - it really sounded as though the lion was cross!*
- keeping our body language welcoming. Young children are very sensitive to body language while we are hearing them read: they dread adult tuts and sighs of exasperation.
- regarding mistakes as useful clues to what needs further help, and encouraging children to see them in this light, too. For me, this is one of the most important elements of encouragement and strengthening motivation. In my work as counsellor of University students, I frequently see young people who are terrified of making mistakes because it seems to them a threat to their own, and to family happiness. Teaching young children to read, we can show them that mistakes can help us and ask ourselves what can we learn from the kind of mistakes they are making. Would more talking about the meaning of the story be useful? Would it be helpful to reinforce phonics as a strategy to 'unlock' a word?



Look for ways to make what children are reading personal to them

Make it personal - make it powerful

The developing brain searches for patterns and needs to repeat an activity in order for it to be stored in the memory: *Repetition is important because it is a basic characteristic of the brain that its nerve cells repeat patterns of activity: skills like walking, talking, eating, playing or writing are all developed from the earliest patterns*³.

Young children (and most of us, surely!) actively seek to repeat what they enjoy. Young children (and again, most of us) remember best what matters to them, what connects with their world. Specifically for reading, this means that we should:

- look for ways to make the necessary repetition of words/sentences/stories full of fun and pleasure. I know that this is asking the teacher to act almost as entertainer - but it can be well worth it. Young children respond well to our use of puppets who 'react' to what the children are reading, and we can bring lots of laughter, sound effects and drama to our teaching to make sure that repetition never feels like a chore.

- look for ways to make what children are reading personal to them.

This means selecting books which reflect the child's world, hobbies and preoccupations. It means talking about the stories, asking children for their opinions and for their own experiences.

- understand that related writing activities can significantly contribute to the way we make things personal and powerful when children learn to read. It's motivating for children to write (or dictate) stories about their own toys and pets and hobbies to make their own lists of friends, favourite foods, sports. And it's especially motivating to write because it is going to be displayed, used and shared.

Confidence

We know that children need a certain amount of confidence and belief in themselves as learners in order to progress with reading skills.

It helps to understand that there are two main types of confidence - confidence in doing and confidence in being.

A confidence in doing is perhaps easier to achieve but a confidence in *being* is vital, too. If we don't feel valued for being ourselves, no achievement can make a permanently positive impression on us and it's hard to sustain motivation in the long term if we lack belief in our own value. (In the *short term* lack of confidence in being can lead to achievement after achievement as the learner tries to compensate for lack of self-worth. This can lead to paralysing emotional difficulties and a rejection of skills in the long term. Many children who can read, don't read and this is one of the reasons.)

In the context of reading we can boost confidence in *being* by: asking children's opinions, by showing that we value their choices, and by avoiding competitive elements when we teach to read. We can boost confidence in *doing* by showing delight in small steps of progress and by giving children time to feel happy with each step before we move on.

Involving parents

In my experience, workshops for parents looking at how to encourage young children's learning - especially reading - are usually well attended and appreciated. Small leaflets or school newsletters on such subjects as *encouraging reading* and *how to boost children's learning at home* are well received, too.

Again, in my experience, the very smallest start in parental involvement is well worth making.

Slowly, with a welcoming atmosphere, a group of three interested parents will become a group of 30 - perhaps more. Many of us are already sharing with parents our knowledge of how skills such as literacy and numeracy develop. It's equally, arguably more, important to share our understanding of the emotional factors which make for the motivated child and the life-long learner.

We need to work together.

Notes

1 Geraldine Taylor is the author of *Help your child learn to read* Ladybird Books Loughborough 1997, ISBN 0 7214 2664 6

2 *Be Your Child's Natural Teacher*: Geraldine Taylor, Second Edition Impact Books London 1993, ISBN 1 874687 10 2

3 *A Human Birthright: Giving the Young Brain a Chance*: Dr John Brierley, British Association for Early Childhood Education: 1984, p 18.

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