

#10666

FEELINGS AND MOTIVATION

WGBH, 2000
Grade Level: 13+
45 Minutes



CAPTIONED MEDIA PROGRAM RELATED RESOURCES

[#9064 CHILDHOOD DEPRESSION](#)

[#9407 SELF-ESTEEM: BEING THE REAL ME](#)

About the Developing Minds Video Library



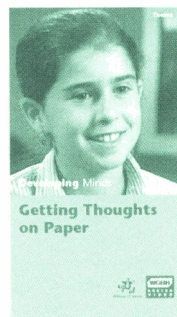
The *Developing Minds* multimedia library features the work of All Kinds of Minds, a private non-profit Institute, affiliated with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All Kinds of Minds offers a broad range of programs and resources that enable parents, educators, and clinicians to help children and adolescents with differences in learning achieve success in school and life. The Institute was co-founded by Dr. Mel Levine, who for more than 25 years has pioneered innovative programs to enhance the understanding and management of students' learning difficulties. Dr. Levine's comprehensive neurodevelopmental model draws on research from a wide range of disciplines. A renowned developmental-behavioral pediatrician, Dr. Levine is also Professor of Pediatrics at the University of North Carolina Medical School and Director of the University's Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning.



Developing Minds is a library of 22 videotapes with accompanying guides. The library is designed to help parents and teachers of elementary and middle-school children explore differences in learning through the approach and conceptual framework of developmental-behavioral pediatrician, author, and professor Dr. Mel Levine.

The heart of the collection, which features children and early adolescents with diverse learning profiles, is divided into *theme* and *construct* videos. The eight theme videos focus on children's struggles and successes with skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics as well as difficulties in communication, understanding, organization, feelings, and behavior. The eight construct videos begin where the theme videos end, illuminating breakdowns in such key areas of brain function as attention, memory, language, neuromotor, social cognition, temporal-sequential ordering, spatial ordering, and higher order cognition.

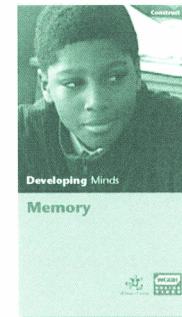
Dr. Levine guides viewers through the videos as he and other experts, teachers, parents, and children provide commentary and strategies. Together, the videos and print guides promote an understanding of learning differences—strengths and weaknesses—and strategies that help children become successful learners. This material also gives parents and teachers a common language to advance effective communication between home and school.



Theme Videos

Present the learning problems and successes of children and early adolescents (40–60 minutes each)

- Mastering the Challenge of Reading
- Getting Thoughts on Paper
- Thinking with Numbers
- Understanding
- Student Output: Producing, Performing, and Communicating
- Getting Organized/Work Habits
- Feelings and Motivation
- Behavioral Complications



Construct Videos

Provide deeper insight into specific neurodevelopmental breakdowns that contribute to differences in learning (30–60 minutes each)

- Attention
- Language
- Neuromotor Function
- Memory
- Social Cognition
- Temporal-Sequential Ordering
- Spatial Ordering
- Higher Order Cognition

How to Use

Together, this video and guide can be used to increase awareness and gain a deeper understanding of children's difficulties with feelings and motivation. The video is divided into three segments: Observations, Teacher Strategies, and Parent Strategies. Observations features home and classroom scenes of children struggling with their emotional reactions to negative academic and social experiences. Teacher Strategies and Parent Strategies provide practical suggestions from Dr. Mel Levine, other experts, teachers, parents, and the children themselves to help address a variety of problems that affect children who feel unsuccessful.

The structure of the guide is similar to the videos, with sections on Observations, Teacher Strategies, and Parent Strategies. In addition, the guide provides a glossary of terms used in the video, a checklist of signs of problems with feelings and motivation, a brief background article on feelings and motivation, and resources for further information.

There are many ways to use these materials, including watching the video alone, working with a partner, participating in a teacher or parent study group, or using the video and guide at a parent-teacher association gathering. However you choose to use them, these materials will provide insight into difficulties with feelings and motivation that children may experience in relation to their learning differences. The Viewing Tips on page 7 offer key questions to reflect upon after watching.



Tips for Using

- Scan the guide and read the introduction and background article. Watch the entire video, then rewatch it, using sections of the guide to reinforce what you see.
- To find information that addresses your needs, go directly to a particular section of the guide, such as Explore the Video, then view related video segments—or refer to the guide alone.
- Begin exploring the video library with **Feelings and Motivation** for an overview of the topic. Then watch related construct tapes, such as **Attention, Language, Memory, and Social Cognition** for information on key neurodevelopmental functions that affect feelings and motivation.

Management by Profile Videos

Introduce a systematic process for developing an individualized educational path based on a child's neurodevelopmental strengths and weaknesses; *A Student Profile* showcases a child as he moves through the process (20–30 minutes each)

- Strategies for Parents
- Strategies for Teachers
- A Student Profile

Introduction Videos

Provide a brief description of the video library components; the Parents' and Teachers' videos also introduce the philosophy and approach of Dr. Mel Levine (10–20 minutes each)

- Video Library Overview
- Introduction for Parents
- Introduction for Teachers



Introduction

"I didn't want to go to school because I was afraid they would make fun of me."

—Shirley,
third grade student

No one likes to fail or have others think they are incompetent. Yet each day, children with learning difficulties may be placed in these situations at school or at home. As hard as they try, children with learning problems may perform poorly and lag behind classmates. Children may also have problems keeping pace with the successes of friends and siblings. Often, these problems lead children to feel that they have disappointed their teachers, parents, friends, and most importantly, themselves. Over time, the accumulated effect of these negative experiences may be emotional reactions that undermine children's self-esteem and motivation to learn.

When children receive repeated messages from adults and peers that they are unsuccessful—or see themselves as less able than their peers—they may start to feel badly about themselves. This reaction may begin a vicious cycle in which negativity develops into a pervasive sense of failure, which makes it even more difficult to succeed. Consider a child who has significant memory problems. Although the child may study hard, she cannot recall the required information during an exam. If the test is returned with a poor grade, she may feel frustrated and embarrassed. Strong feelings of inadequacy may influence her behavior the next time she must study for an exam. Rather than exert much effort, she may decide "What's the use?" which increases the likelihood she'll do poorly.

"If you get something wrong, sometimes you don't feel so good about yourself."

—Leslie,
seventh grade student

Many children with learning difficulties may effectively hide their feelings. Some manage to stay composed throughout the school day, permitting themselves to show emotional distress only in the security of their own bedrooms. Others may become expert at covering up learning problems, deflecting attention away from their weakness by misbehaving or becoming the class clown. As a result, teachers and parents may be unaware that these negative feelings exist until they become significant. By that time, a child may have concluded that he or she is incapable of succeeding in school or in life.

Many factors can affect the feelings of a child who is having school problems. The work of Dr. Mel Levine and other researchers has led to more understanding of how learning differences may be complicated by negative feelings and loss of motivation. Research indicates that key neurodevelopmental functions including attention, memory, language, and social cognition play a role in a child's learning and emotions.

Parents and teachers can help children cope with negative feelings resulting from poor performance by learning how to support children when they are feeling badly about themselves. Effective help involves understanding the different ways children may react—feeling humiliated, developing low self-esteem, losing motivation, viewing themselves as helpless, being anxious, or withdrawing. It also involves helping children develop the tools needed to deal with such feelings successfully. According to Dr. Levine, children will feel less sad and negative “if they feel that the reasons for their school difficulties are being dealt with, are not being neglected . . . that ‘even though I have a learning problem, I’m making progress, that folks are helping me improve my memory, that people are doing something about my attentional problem.’”

Humiliation

Many children with learning difficulties who perceive themselves as inadequate frequently feel humiliated and embarrassed. Part of having negative feelings in school may involve the constant fear that your learning problems are going to be exposed in front of peers.

A common reaction to the fear of being humiliated is to find ways to avoid these feelings by redirecting the attention away from a learning problem. Rather than expose the fact that they cannot perform in some way (e.g., read or write), children may avoid a task, claim to hate school, crack a joke at an inappropriate time, or otherwise act out.

Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem, of which there are two types, is one of the most common complications of poor or disappointing school performance. A child may feel inferior and badly about himself or herself in any situation, or low self-esteem may be localized to a particular setting, such as school.

Many children suffer low self-esteem as a result of comparing themselves to others who are more skilled or talented. This may be especially true for children with learning problems who find themselves struggling next to more successful peers and siblings on a daily basis.

Loss of Motivation

Generally, children will attempt tasks if they think that their efforts will pay off. They become motivated if they believe they have the knowledge and skills to achieve a goal with a manageable degree of effort.

Sometimes adults say that a child is not succeeding in school because she is not motivated. However, this may not always be the case, especially for children with learning difficulties. For these children, it may be more appropriate to say that the child is unmotivated because she is performing poorly. The child may become more motivated when she starts succeeding.



“We cannot develop strategies for kids to boost their self-esteem unless . . . we realize that each child has strengths—or islands of competence. We have to identify those strengths and reinforce them.”

—Robert Brooks, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist; Faculty,
Harvard Medical School

When a child loses motivation, it is usually because she does not think that the goal is obtainable, even if she puts forth a major effort. Children tend to avoid activities in which they believe there is no hope for success.

Helplessness

When children have a pervasive feeling of “What’s the use?” they may develop learned helplessness—a feeling that success and failure are out of their control. For example, a child who does poorly on a test may attribute it to the fact that he or she is dumb. The same child may dismiss doing well on another test as just luck. Feelings of loss of control may also lead to a sense of pessimism. Children may make pessimistic statements about the future, believing that things will only get worse.

Sometimes, adults inadvertently reinforce feelings of learned helplessness when they do not recognize the role that learning problems play in a child’s performance. A child who has attention difficulties that cause him to experience enormous mental fatigue may find it difficult to finish assignments. If a teacher or parent repeatedly reacts by telling the child to “just work harder” or to “stop being lazy,” the child may start believing that he is lazy.

Anxiety

Children may experience performance anxiety when they are frightened or intimidated by school expectations. This is especially true when the child has difficulty performing the task—the child with gross motor problems who is expected to climb ropes in front of his gym class, or the child with expressive language difficulties who is called upon to answer a question in class. For children with learning problems, anxiety may have a snowball effect. They become anxious about how their learning weaknesses might interfere with their performance, and their anxiety actually causes them to perform poorly.

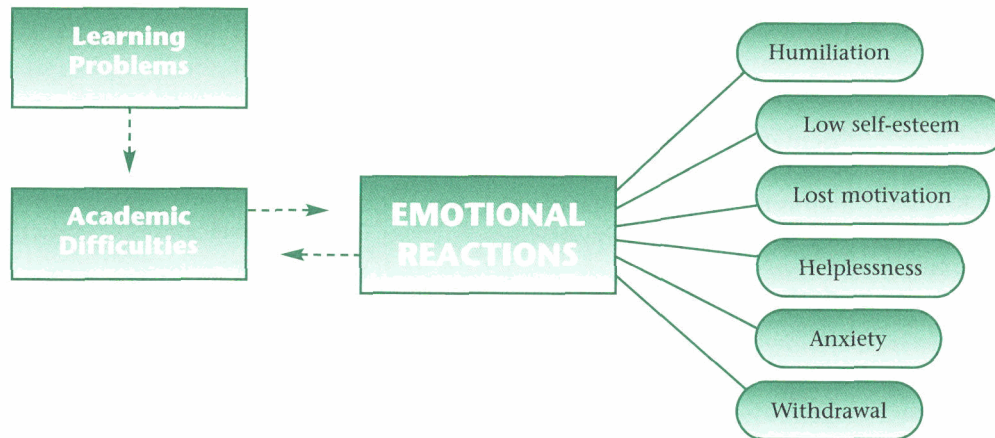
One of the most severe forms of performance anxiety is school phobia or school avoidance. In these cases, children may find school to be such a traumatic and humiliating experience that they are reluctant to attend. They may develop aches and pains and do everything possible to avoid attending school.

Withdrawal

Children may withdraw from participation in both classroom and social interactions as a form of self-protection. They may say little, attempting to be as inconspicuous as possible. In more serious cases, children may become depressed and lose interest in activities or topics about which they once were enthusiastic.

Negative Feelings Diagram

This diagram offers a graphic representation of how a cycle of negativity can develop in children with learning difficulties.



Feelings & Motivation

Viewing Aids

The **Glossary** and **Signs of Problems with Feelings and Motivation** explain concepts presented in the video. Refer to them as you view the video or afterward when reflecting on how you might help a particular child.

Glossary

accommodations: adjustments to tasks that work around a child's neurodevelopmental differences or weak skills; sometimes referred to as bypass strategies

anxiety: feelings of apprehension or being frightened, panicked, or intimidated by something, such as a child who experiences anxiety related to test-taking

attention: brain functions related to having the mental energy needed for learning and behavior, the processing of information, and the regulation of what you say and do

depression: the state of being chronically and pervasively sad; in addition to looking sad, indicators may include fatigue, loss of interest in things that were once attractive, and a pronounced loss of motivation

demystification: the process of helping children understand—and have the terms necessary for coping with—their learning strengths and weaknesses

dysfunction: weakness in any neurodevelopmental process, for example, not having enough mental energy to complete a task

expressive language: the ways in which thoughts are communicated in speaking or writing; expressive language abilities allow children to participate in class discussion, explain their ideas orally, and communicate thoughts in writing

mental effort: initiating and maintaining the flow of mental energy needed to start and complete assignments and tasks

motivation: willingness to exert effort to complete a task

neurodevelopmental functions: brain-based processes needed to acquire and produce knowledge, skills, and approaches to learning

school avoidance: an overwhelming fear of school that may result in refusal to attend

self-esteem: confidence in one's abilities, satisfaction in one's accomplishments, and self-respect

verbal pragmatics: using and understanding language in social contexts

Signs of Problems with Feelings and Motivation

Humiliation

- acts out (e.g., telling jokes or acting silly) in situations where a learning weakness may be exposed
- states that she hates school or a particular activity or teacher
- avoids or refuses to participate in situations that are difficult (e.g., reading, sports)
- frequently comments that he feels disrespected

Low Self-Esteem

- does not make eye contact during learning situations in which he does not have strengths
- looks sad or anxious during activities in which he is not skilled
- lacks energy

Loss of Motivation

- gives up easily
- feels it is not worth trying to do something because it is unattainable
- will not try to do things that require much effort
- associates with others who are unmotivated

- neglects to study or complete assignments
- makes excuses for not completing work or studying

Helplessness

- believes that success is due to luck and not anything that she does
- is pessimistic about the future
- does not think he has what it takes to be successful
- does not feel she can learn from mistakes

Anxiety

- complains of aches and pains during or before an activity he finds difficult
- makes negative comments to herself during tests
- admits to feeling overwhelmed during some tasks
- tenses up during challenging activities

Withdrawal

- behaves inconspicuously—doesn't say much in public
- does not take intellectual risks
- expresses the desire to be alone
- is depressed
- has lost interest in participating in normal daily activities

Explore the Video

Observations

Go to these scenes to reinforce what you see in the video or focus your discussion.

Humiliation

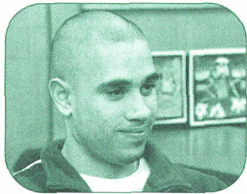
1. Candace describes how the negative feedback she received from her teacher embarrassed her in front of others.



She tells how she was:

- told to stop working on an assignment because she was doing it all wrong
- criticized in front of her peers
- asked in front of others to stay after class
- made to feel “stupid”

2. Edwin fears people will think he is “dumb” if they find out he has problems with reading and writing.



To cover up feelings of embarrassment, he:

- avoids talking about his problems
- cracks jokes and makes silly statements so that classmates will not know he has a problem
- causes trouble to look “cool” and make friends
- acts out to gain a certain level of respect among classmates

Low Self-Esteem

Joey's and Leslie's lowered self-esteem stems from their learning problems.



They explain that being confused while classmates are moving ahead makes them:

- feel bad about themselves in comparison
- think they are the only “dumb” ones

Viewing Tips

- Watch the entire video to get a sense of the concepts and issues presented. Then rewatch the parts that interest you.
- View the video with a partner or in a small group and discuss it. Consider the following questions: *How do children feel about their problems with attention, language, memory, or social cognition? Do these specific feelings relate to their emotional difficulties or loss of motivation? Which strategies are effective in helping children deal with their negative feelings resulting from poor performance? Are there any strategies you might want to try?*
- Watch the video with a child who has similar feelings, then discuss reactions. Have siblings watch the video to gain understanding of their brother's or sister's difficulties.

Loss of Motivation

When children feel that they cannot succeed on an assignment, they may stop putting in the required effort.

"I think kids who are feeling sad will feel a lot less sad if they feel that the reasons for their school difficulties are being dealt with, are not being neglected. If they have a real sense that even though they have a learning problem, they are making progress."

—Dr. Mel Levine

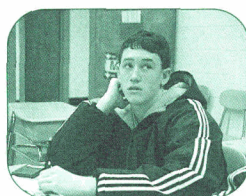


You hear Nelson describe loss of motivation as:

- feeling you have let yourself down
- giving up when you cannot function in school

Helplessness

Giving up has become a way of life for Danny.



He describes:

- knowing in advance that there are things he's going to forget
- feeling that no matter what he does, no good will come of it
- being used to not receiving passing marks at school
- finding that each year school becomes more difficult
- fearing he will not "make it" at school

Anxiety and Withdrawal

1. Answering questions during reading group makes third grade student Dustin feel anxious—he looks down and tries to smile when called upon.



His teacher describes his symptoms as:

- complaining each day of headaches, dizziness, and upset stomach
- giving up and crying in class
- getting frustrated when he cannot do a math problem

2. When children like Joey are unable to meet expectations, they may withdraw and stop taking any intellectual risks.



Joey explains his feelings as:

- wanting to be by himself in his own space
- not wanting life to go on sometimes because it keeps getting tougher to succeed

Teacher Strategies

The techniques used by teachers in these scenes can reinforce what you see in the video or focus your discussion.

1. To prevent children from feeling humiliated, Ms. Rosoff describes the importance of establishing a safe learning environment.



Her methods include:

- teaching students by communicating in language they feel comfortable with and can understand
- giving them opportunities to compete successfully

"Once [children] feel safe, they are able to take risks. If [we] teach them at a level . . . they can understand . . . they can learn to compete."

—Nancy Rosoff,
School Director

2. Ms. Jones bolsters Christina's confidence and self-esteem each day.



She helps Christina take risks by:

- thanking her for participating
- offering praise
- taking her aside and giving her positive feedback about her progress
- generating experiences that will be successful for her

3. Teachers in the video demonstrate how they use classroom jobs to help children stay motivated and develop a positive self-image.



Examples include:

- letting a child help the teacher and classmates with computer problems
- encouraging young adolescents to tutor younger children
- providing non-physical jobs such as team manager or statistician to children who have athletic difficulties

Parent Strategies

The techniques used by parents in these scenes can reinforce what you see in the video or focus your discussion.

1. Parents in the video emphasize the importance of not giving up themselves when their child seems to be withdrawing or feeling helpless.

"The biggest and most important thing we've done for her is getting her in the right situation where she feels comfortable with the other kids and feels that she can be successful."

—Parent



They discuss:

- not letting their own fears get in the way of helping their children
- speaking up when they detect a problem, even though the school may not agree
- realizing that all children have unique strengths and weaknesses
- getting outside help for their children
- making sure children know they are always there for them

2. Parents in the video also share ways they have boosted their children's self-esteem and motivation.



They try to:

- find situations in which the child feels comfortable and can be successful
- let their child know they believe in him or her
- not compare their child to other children
- find ways to show trust in the child
- encourage the child to see a positive future

3. When her child became overwhelmed and depressed, one parent describes how she began a dialogue with him.



Her methods included:

- intervening early
- concentrating on helping him
- focusing on what he needed to get done to alleviate the stress he was experiencing
- attempting to understand what he was experiencing and validating those experiences

Home and School Collaboration

Living with or teaching a child who has developed negative feelings about his or her school performance can be an emotionally charged experience. Frustration and confusion can complicate the conversation between parents and teachers about what to do. Respect for each other and open communication can reduce tension and enable parents and teachers to benefit from each other's expertise and knowledge of the child from different perspectives. Working together, parents, teachers, and the children themselves can inform one another about how to best address the child's needs.

Parents and Teachers Communicating about Feelings

When you suspect a child feels badly about himself or herself in relation to school, schedule a parent-teacher meeting to share information about the child. The following "talking points" can help structure the discussion.

Acknowledge emotional reactions to the situation. Discuss how children who experience humiliation, frustration, or failure at school may become so fearful that they give up. Some may turn their energy to acting out. Help children identify possible sources of the problem. If a child stares out the window during a lecture because he has attention problems, recognize that the child's lack of attention is not intentional. Discuss ways to accommodate his difficulties.

Share observations of the child's feelings and motivation and discuss where the breakdown is occurring. What are the worries or concerns? Has the child lost motivation to learn? Does the child have low self-esteem? Do difficulties in attention, memory, language, or social cognition seem to affect the child's feelings about his performance? Does the child have similar problems at home and at school?

Identify and discuss the child's strengths and interests. How can they be used to improve her feelings and motivation to complete tasks? Can a child who is fascinated with the ocean be put in

charge of caring for the classroom aquarium to build confidence and self-esteem? Can parents encourage their child to help a younger child with a task to enhance feelings of self-worth?

Discuss possible strategies. What have you both tried that has been successful and not so successful? Are there accommodations that address learning issues that may in turn improve feelings and motivation?

Discuss appropriate next steps. Establish a plan for ongoing discussion and problem solving. Should specialists be consulted? How can you best advocate for the child?

When a problem with feelings related to school performance has been specified:

- Learn more about feelings and motivation from other experts, reference books, and Web sites. (See Resources beginning on page 20.)
- Seek assistance from colleagues and experienced parents, professional organizations, and support groups.
- Request that the school's learning specialist or guidance counselor observe the child, then consult with you on strategies to use in the classroom and at home.
- Investigate the availability of professional help from pediatricians, mental health professionals, and specialists such as school psychologists and social workers.

"Children's feelings about themselves are very conditioned by the feedback they get from adults . . . [children need] a lot of positive feedback from teachers and parents."

—Dr. Mel Levine

Talking with Children about Their Strengths and Weaknesses

"In the adult world, what really counts is how strong your strengths are, not how weak your weaknesses are." —Dr. Mel Levine

Management by Profile

Demystification—helping children understand their neurodevelopmental strengths and weaknesses—is part of Management by Profile, a process developed by Dr. Levine and All Kinds of Minds for managing the education of children with differences in learning. Teachers, parents, and the children themselves participate in developing a learning plan for the child that includes strengthening of strengths, accommodations, interventions at the break-down points, and protection from humiliation.

For more information on Management by Profile, see the Management by Profile guide and the videos, *Strategies for Parents*, *Strategies for Teachers*, and *A Student Profile*.

Moments of frustration as well as pride are common for children who have negative feelings related to poor performance and for the adults who work with them. Children's intensity about these feelings may interfere with their performance in and out of school. Dr. Levine suggests using a process called demystification, which, through open discussion with supportive adults, helps children learn to put borders around their differences and understand that, like everyone else, they have strengths and weaknesses. This process creates a shared sense of optimism that the child and adult are working toward a common goal, and that negative feelings can be coped with successfully. The following suggestions can help you demystify children's negative feelings and loss of motivation.

Eliminate any stigma. Empathy can reduce children's frustration and anxiety about their learning problems. Emphasize that a lot of people react in similar ways—they are not "weird." Explain that you understand the way they feel, but it is interfering with their progress. Reassure children that you will help them find ways of dealing with the negative feelings that relate to learning problems. Share an anecdote about how you handled anxiety or humiliation in a learning situation.

Discuss strengths and interests.

Help children find their strengths and value their interests. Use concrete examples, but avoid false praise. To a child who loves history, you might say, "You have a real understanding of historical events and people. I love it when you tell me about people who lived in other times." Identify books, videos, Web sites, or places in the community that can help children build on their strengths and interests.

Discuss areas of weakness. Use concrete language to define negative feelings. "You know how you sometimes feel badly about yourself in school? That's called low self-esteem." Use plain language to explain how negative feelings may make a learning problem worse, such as, "Worrying about how badly you might do on a test takes time away from studying."

If you don't study, you probably will not do well on the test."

Emphasize optimism. Help children realize that they can improve—they can work on their weaknesses and make their strengths stronger. Point out future possibilities for success given their current strengths. Help children build a sense of control over their negative feelings. For example, a child with test anxiety can learn how to use a relaxation strategy to overcome the anxiety.

Identify an ally. Help children locate a mentor—a favorite teacher, a coach, or a neighbor—who will work with and support them. Explain to children that they can help themselves by describing how they interact best with others. Older children can explain the strategies that work for them, while younger ones may need adult support. Encourage children to be active partners with their allies.

Protect from humiliation. Help children strengthen self-esteem and maintain pride by protecting them from public humiliation related to their learning differences. Always avoid criticizing children in public and protect them from embarrassment in front of siblings and classmates. For example, do not pressure a child with gross motor problems to try out for competitive sports teams.

Strategies to Try

You may use the strategies on the following pages to help children deal with negative feelings that result from poor performance. Many of these strategies are accommodations—they work around a child’s differences by offering alternative approaches. For example, if a child has test-taking anxiety, his teacher could allow him more time or the opportunity to work in a separate room. Other strategies are designed to specifically strengthen a weakness. If a child is reluctant to speak up in class, for instance, create an environment that is specifically supportive of risk-taking. From the strategies suggested below, select those that you and the child think might work best.

General Strategies

Create a positive, caring environment. Helping children feel they are valued and respected members of the classroom or family can go a long way toward alleviating feelings of inadequacy. Take time each day to talk with the children about their interests. Draw attention to their strengths frequently.

Manage the learning problem. When negative feelings stem from learning differences, put appropriate strategies in place. For example, if a child has test anxiety related to poor memory, work together to generate strategies that will improve his memory or accommodate the test situation.

Be a mentor or help the child find a coach. Everyone needs someone who truly believes in and stands by them, even when there are problems. Whether this is a parent or relative, a neighbor or older sibling, the child will benefit from having someone who is consistently available to give support and monitor her progress.

Build a positive learning community where children help each other.

In classrooms, have children work as a team or as peer buddies who help others during activities. In afterschool programs, ask children to serve as peer coaches.

Show that you believe in them. Refrain from comparing children. Reward children’s efforts by giving positive feedback routinely. For instance, make it a rule that you must share at least four positive things about a child’s performance before you can share one negative thing.

Involve the child. Allow children to tell you how they view a situation so you understand the problem from their perspective. Refrain from telling them how they should feel, or from judging them with statements such as, “If you would only try harder,” or “Who cares if others make fun of you?” Such comments only undermine the problem-solving process. Ask children what you can do to help them deal with their feelings. If children answer they are not certain, you can say, “That’s okay, together we can try to figure out how I can be of help.”

Strategy Tips

Decide which strategies to try by observing the child and identifying the ways in which he or she learns best.

- It may take several attempts to see positive results from one strategy. Don’t give up too soon.
- If the first few strategies you try do not improve the child’s skills, try others.
- Most of these strategies can be adapted for use with different age groups.

Intervene early and remain calm. Watch for negative feelings. Do not wait until negative feelings worsen and become more complicated to deal with. When a child refuses to do something out of fear or anxiety, do not become angry. Remember that the more angry or excited you become, the more distraught and withdrawn the child may become.

Let children know you are there to listen. Use statements such as, “You seem very anxious. I want you to know I’m here to listen to what is bothering you.” Do not force children to talk about their feelings, however. Some children have difficulty describing negative feelings. In some cases, it is better to engage children in an activity they do well and talk to them about their success.

Humiliation

Identify alternative roles for children. Find ways that children can participate successfully. For example, if a child’s consistent restlessness is disruptive to the class, assign him the role of class messenger, giving him a chance to bring mail or lunch counts to the office and to move around. At home, find pursuits in which the child can excel, like exercising the dog.

Note situations in which children feel most vulnerable. Ask children which tasks and activities are setting off negative feelings. Discuss ways to accommodate tasks and activities to decrease the feelings of vulnerability. If a child becomes more distraught during a subject that is difficult for him, you may need to build in more academic supports. For example, if a child feels anxious during tests, teach him study and test-taking strategies. Or if the child tends to be withdrawn during group discussions, then you may want to avoid calling on him without advance warning.

Protect children. If you know a child has difficulty with something (e.g., poor performance on tests due to a memory problem), do not draw attention to it. For example, do not post tests or writing assignments without children’s approval. Or, if a child is staring out the door due to an attention problem, use a subtle strategy to reengage him in the activity, such as walking by and gently touching his shoulder.

Reduce or prioritize tasks. Be aware of children who are feeling overwhelmed. For example, adjust the number of problems or reduce the amount of homework for a time.

Low Self-Esteem

Find daily activities where children can feel responsible. Ask children for their help. In classrooms, assign tasks such as setting up audio-visual equipment, caring for classroom animals, or passing out snacks. At home, assign responsibilities such as making the dinner salad, or reading a bedtime story to a younger sibling.

Find opportunities for children to help others. Investigate service learning experiences or volunteer opportunities in the community. Encourage the child to tutor or help a younger child with homework or help out an elderly couple with chores, for example. These activities communicate to children the important message that they have something valuable to offer their community.

“If [negative feelings] percolate, if they just fester and don’t get dealt with, [they] can explode. They can paralyze and inhibit an individual . . . and lower somebody’s aspirations so that they don’t expect much of themselves.”

—Dr. Mel Levine

Discuss children's interests. During mealtimes, talk about family events and things that are of interest to the child. At school, set aside time each day for children to share things they care about.

Make positive comments in public. Let children overhear you praising something they have done.

Loss of Motivation

Ask children to be aware of their feelings and motivations. Have children keep track of when they feel best and have high motivation, as well as when they have the most difficulty. Invite them to discuss the results and generate suggestions for improvement.

Track improvements. Have children mark their progress toward goals on a regular basis. Record the data and celebrate progress.

Promote a sense of ownership. Find something that the child has done well. Be explicit in describing the accomplishment and attribute the success to the child's efforts.

Provide activities the child enjoys. To instill motivation and joy for learning, provide children with opportunities to develop interests and to have enjoyable breaks from difficult tasks.

Reinforce children for trying. Provide frequent praise when children are exerting effort in the face of challenging goals.

Encourage children to participate. Let children know you and their classmates value their efforts and that you want them to participate in activities.

Helplessness

Foster hope. Provide children with opportunities to see that small steps they take now are resulting in some success. Point out daily accomplishments and keep track of them over time. Make sure children understand that all accomplishments, no matter how small they seem, are important. Also, emphasize that some strategies may not work at first but learning from them can lead to developing successful strategies.

Find positive things children can do. Each day, find opportunities for children to do things they are good at and comment on their efforts. If they are good artists, showcase their efforts. If they are skilled on the computer, let others know they can call upon them for assistance.

Give children choices. Help children develop a sense of control by presenting things they do not want to do as choices. For example, let a child decide whether to do homework before or after dinner. At school, consider letting a child who dislikes chorus participate in the spring performance by selling tickets.

Three Basic Steps for Motivating Children

1. Make sure children feel comfortable in the classroom, that they belong, and that the teacher likes them.
2. Give children a say in solving their own problems.
3. Ensure that children feel competent in carrying out solutions.

"How do teachers make a child feel that they really care? When I've interviewed kids, they have said that when a teacher smiles at them or finds a few extra minutes to talk with them it means a lot."

—Robert Brooks, Ph.D
Clinical Psychologist;
Faculty, Harvard
Medical School

Describe possible futures that will allow children to showcase their skills.

Remind children that many individuals with learning differences grow up to be successful adults. For example, if a child is good at drawing, talk about professions that require artistic abilities such as graphic design or architecture.

Help children understand there are many factors in school performance.

Discuss reasons why children may succeed or fail (e.g., luck, exertion, practice, help from others, ability). Point out that effort and practice are elements which are under their control.

Anxiety and Withdrawal

Feelings of anxiety and withdrawal can exist alone but more often are the result of humiliating or demotivating experiences. Many of the general strategies at the beginning of this section can also be tried with a child who has become anxious and depressed.

Teach children relaxation strategies. Use “stop and think” strategies in which children pause and ask themselves, “How am I doing?” and “What should I do next?” Show children how to breathe deeply to relax. One technique called the “mini” can be used across a variety of situations. To perform the mini, children inhale slowly and count from one to four. As they exhale, they count from four to one. Taking four such mini breaths can reduce feelings of anxiety.

Find alternative ways for children to participate. For example, have a child take a test in a room away from classmates if that helps reduce test-taking anxiety. A student who really struggles with writing long essays could be allowed to occasionally take an oral exam.

Talk to children about physical symptoms. Explain that excess stress may lead to physical symptoms. Discuss ways to eliminate stress such as deep breathing, meditation, and physical activities, such as exercise.

Provide children with places where they feel safe. A quiet room or a private space may help children relax and feel safe.

Learning to Relax by Breathing Deeply

- Have children put their hands over their abdomens so that their fingertips are just barely touching it.
- Have them take a breath so that their fingertips separate as the stomach inflates on the inhale, then come back together as the stomach deflates on the exhale.
- Ask them to feel how the diaphragm muscles move.

For more strategies to address difficulties with feelings and motivation, refer to the *Attention, Memory, Language, and Social Cognition* videos and guides in this library.

Background on Feelings and Motivation

When a child has motivation, a can-do attitude usually pervades even the toughest situation, in school, in afterschool activities, and in life. When motivation is lacking, children may not even embark on a challenging task because they believe they will fail.

In the past, some adults may have assumed students who didn't turn in homework, gave up on tests, or tried half-heartedly at assignments were lazy, uninterested, or unintelligent. Research shows that few, if any, children really want to fail in school. Many just become frustrated by their learning problems. Children who do not experience success often stop trying altogether when it becomes too humiliating and disappointing to keep failing.

It's a vicious cycle. Children who suffer from learning problems, such as difficulty thinking with numbers or getting thoughts on paper, are often unsuccessful in school. They may start to feel badly about themselves. Those negative feelings can make matters worse as their self-esteem erodes and they start to believe they can't succeed at the next task they try. That fear, which often translates into a lack of motivation, can become pervasive, spreading out of school to friendships and afterschool activities. It may even follow children as they grow, increasing their reluctance to try new experiences.

Research on children's feelings and education offers significant hope for children who experience emotional and motivational difficulties. Dr. Mel Levine, of All Kinds of Minds, has spent decades exploring the relationship between learning problems and the brain. Historically, a child's lack of success was seen as a lack of motivation. But Dr. Levine suggests teachers and parents turn that phrase around: It may be that a child isn't motivated because he isn't succeeding.

Children can recover that motivation and rebuild their self-esteem, Levine says, but only if they are told exactly why they may be feeling badly about school and are given strategies to work around learning problems. Children must also be given opportunities to shine in areas in which they have strengths—in school and out. "I often feel that for all kids, success is like a vitamin," Levine says. "You need plenty of it to lead a kind of mentally healthy life . . . There is probably nothing harder than to grow up a disappointment."

Children who have negative feelings or who have lost their motivation may dislike school because it's the place where they fail. Others may not turn in assignments, or only partially complete them. Some children may stare out classroom windows and appear not to be listening to the teacher. A teacher may be blamed for a test that a child considers tough, or children may cheat, saying they no longer care. Some become withdrawn and sad while still others constantly compare themselves negatively to classmates or siblings. Dr. Robert Brooks, a clinical psychologist, says many children labeled as resistant or difficult are actually showing desperate ways of coping with the emotional pain of trying and not succeeding.

Sometimes a child's feelings will transfer into physical pain, such as a stomach ache or headache before a test. Some children's existing medical problems intensify, such as wheezing more if they have asthma. Parents and teachers should not dismiss these symptoms. In many cases, Dr. Levine says, stress about school can weaken the immune system, which

Helping Children with Negative Feelings and Loss of Motivation

- Talk with children about exactly what is happening and why they might be feeling sad about school.
- Reassure a child who is attempting a new task by providing ongoing support and praise. Let the child know that managing frustration is a part of the learning process.
- Never give false praise but find an area where a child excels and find a forum where he or she can express it.
- Ask children what is working best for them. Don't merely prescribe a method you think will work best.

can in fact make a child physically ill. Instead, the adults must work with the child to find out what is bothering them and develop strategies to help them.

It is difficult to estimate how many children with learning differences have related emotional problems. The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities estimated in 1998 that over 454,000 children in public schools have a serious emotional disturbance. Educators believe that number excludes hundreds of thousands who may have less obvious problems, including a constant fear of public humiliation, low self-esteem, helplessness and/or anxiety. An added complication is that sporadic feelings of sadness, disappointment, and failure are a natural part of growing up. These feelings become a problem when they last for an extended period of time and affect a child's overall performance.

Not all children with learning problems suffer from lack of motivation or low self-esteem. Dr. Brooks' years of research indicate that some children appear to be born with easygoing temperaments and a strong sense of "personal control," or the belief that the task they face is within their power to solve. These children often get positive reinforcement from adults for their attitude, which encourages them to keep trying. Other children are less likely to believe they can master a situation or assignment and may say they were born to fail when they don't understand something. They may experience few positive responses from adults, which can exacerbate their negative feelings. Dr. Brooks says it is vital that those children who have the most difficulty are given positive, honest feedback from adults.

There are many ways of boosting children's motivation and self-esteem. Priscilla Vail, a teacher and author with expertise on individual learning styles, advises that parents and teachers help develop a child's "emotional brain." She suggests

that adults should break down tasks into small steps that children can easily master and feel good about. Like Dr. Levine, Vail says children should be encouraged to explore areas where they have strengths or interests, for example singing or playing a particular sport. Brooks calls these areas "islands of competence" where children can be proud of their accomplishments. Adults must also help children explore ways to work around their learning difficulties. Vail emphasizes that teachers also need to grade children in ways that don't discourage them—unlike a red "F" on a test. Teachers might choose to use portfolios, folders of children's work over time that shows their progress.

Dr. Levine says one of the most important ways an adult can help a child is to "demystify" his or her negative feelings or loss of motivation and help the child understand these feelings. Adults may need to make the link between a learning problem and apparent sadness or anxiety—a child may not make the connection independently. Point out that the child, for example, seems sad or always gets a headache the day before a math test. Then try to figure out with the child exactly what the problem is, whether it's reading word problems or having difficulty understanding numbers. It's important to tell a child exactly and honestly what is wrong and make sure they understand that the problem is only one facet of their lives. Some children's emotions, such as anxiety, can be managed by medication. Dr. Levine points out, however, that medication is not a cure for emotional problems associated with learning difficulties. Medication may help by alleviating symptoms, but it is largely a temporary remedy.

Children's home life plays an important role in relation to their motivation and feelings towards school. According to Dr. Betty Osman, an educational psychologist and author of a guide for families, parents need strength, creativity, and an in-depth

understanding of their child's learning difficulties to ensure their child is getting the best education possible. Dr. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and author of a book about helping children manage emotions and learning, has developed a list of basic tips. For example, teachers and parents should eliminate sarcasm so children do not have to interpret how that adult is really feeling. Adults should always encourage children's questions, and help children identify their feelings and find words to express exactly how they are feeling. It is also important for parents and teachers to let children know it's okay to fail, and if they do, the parent or teacher will help them succeed.

Parents play a crucial role in finding help for their children early in the process. A poll sponsored by the Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities in 2000 found that 44 percent of the parents surveyed who thought their child had a learning problem waited more than a year to act. Dr. Larry B. Silver, a Georgetown University Medical School psychiatrist, emphasizes that parents need to get help for children as soon as they are experiencing difficulty—before they feel great frustration or get in the habit of giving up. When parents and teachers start helping children at the first sign of struggle, children stand the best chance of learning how to cope with frustration and develop feelings of positive self-worth.

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www.nichcy.org "Emotional Disturbance Fact Sheet."

www.allkindsofminds.org/navframe/navlibFS.asp
"Barely a Gleam of Self-Esteem."

Resources

For more information about how to understand a child's feelings and enhance motivation, consult the references below.

Web Sites

All Kinds of Minds www.allkindsofminds.org
Explores how to foster a more positive outlook for children with learning differences. The Library section of the site includes case studies and articles such as "Barely a Gleam of Self-Esteem" and "The Disabling of Labeling" by Dr. Mel Levine. The site's LearningBase offers further guidance and references for teachers and parents.

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org Informs parents about current medical research and available resources; see "Facts for Families and Other Resources" to learn more about emotional and behavioral issues in children and adolescents.

American Psychological Association—Children, Youth, and Families Office www.apa.org/pi/cyf Publishes free materials about emotional health. The site also links to research that is searchable by topic; see www.apa.org/psychnet/children.html

KidsPeace (The National Center for Kids Overcoming Crisis) www.kidspeace.org
Provides resources to promote the emotional well-being of children; links to the Center's online Healing Magazine.

LD Online www.ldonline.org Links to extensive resources for both parents and teachers to help children manage their emotions by improving self-esteem.

Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) www.ldanatl.org Offers a range of articles in the Publications section of the site about children's emotional well-being.

Mind/Body Medical Institute www.mindbody.harvard.edu Offers information and resources to enhance children's coping skills and bring balance to mind, body, and spirit; advocates "the relaxation response" to reduce stress and restore a child's self-esteem.

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) www.nclld.org
Publishes short online articles, such as "General Tips for Building Self-Esteem," and "Promoting Confidence."

National Institute of Mental Health www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/index.cfm
Provides information to the public about children's and adolescents' emotional and behavioral health.

Raising Resilient Children Project www.raisingresilientkids.com Offers articles and lists other resources about fostering resilience in children; provides information about tapes and written material featuring the work of Drs. Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein.

Schwab Learning www.schwablearning.org Offers families information for identifying and managing differences in learning and resources for connecting with others; provides information in both Spanish and English.

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Resources for Children and Adolescents

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