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Motivation

A Motivating Force, Stimulus, or Influence: Incentive, Drive

By Andrew Pudewa

To accomplish difficult tasks, motivation is absolutely necessary. No one doubts the need for motivating students, and methods of inspiring them to accomplish a teacher's goals are numerous. On one extreme, there is fear: "Do this or die," while on another, huge reward: "Do this and you win a million dollars." When motivating children to write, however, there are some significant principles that must come into play because the fear of death impedes learning, and ultimately, material reward becomes ineffective. Some children write for fun; reading what they've written is its own reward. They embrace the idea of journals, and, inspired by their dreams and future, they write because they have a mission: to become writers. But these students are rare. Most children, especially those for whom writing is difficult, don't have an instinctive inner drive to write. Typically the desire must be developed, and often the teacher's biggest challenge is creating and maintaining that motivation.

For most of us, the basic reason for writing lies in Audience. We write a letter because we believe that someone will read it. We complete an assignment because it will be read and graded. We submit an article to a publication because we hope it will be published and appreciated by many. When there are readers, writers will work. Naturally, a positive response from the reader—be it parent or teacher, publisher or public—will motivate the writer to continue presenting his words on paper to his Audience. This approval is in fact the most effective form of motivation that exists. Therefore, let us consider a few ways to help build children's motivation to write by developing Audience, first at home, then in community, and finally in the larger world.

At home, and for the young child, the most important Audience is the family. Some families are able to nurture a powerful enthusiasm for each other's accomplishments. Feeling joy in seeing what their children (or brothers and sisters) have done, these families are rich with smiles, words of praise and appreciation. Refrigerators become the public posting place to acknowledge artistic accomplishments, and parental smiles are worth more than a mint to a young child making her first serious efforts in facing a new challenge. Sadly, the parent's initial excitement over the child's accomplishments may begin to wane

as the need for correction gradually increases. The cute, unconventionally fresh expressions of the child are not quite so amusing when they are considered awkward or wrong in comparison to an adult standard. In our effort to teach children “correct” writing skills, we often forget that they still benefit from frequent huge smiles, joyful hugs, and enthusiastic genuine compliments. As parents express appreciation for the child’s efforts, others in the family can catch the habit of appreciating and acknowledging one another.

Some successful families have developed specific ways for building the home Audience. A section of wall space can be set aside to “showcase” the best writing of each child for the week or month, possibly accompanied by illustrations or coloring. How about taking a half hour or so one evening a week to let each family member read aloud something they’ve recently written or worked on? This type of “family forum” gives each child a built-in deadline, a reason to do their best, and an appreciative Audience at home, all of which are vital components in motivating children to do their best work. Additionally, a publication like “Our Family News” (which could contain stories, poems, artwork, reports, and more), would not only help you overcome the stress, fear, or guilt associated with the dreaded “Holiday Letter,” but could become a way to periodically provide an Audience for children’s writing that extends even beyond family and into the larger community. Most importantly, it would give you an opportunity to do the single most powerful motivational activity: demonstrate the importance of writing by working on it together! Successful families know that to effectively encourage children to write often, it must become a cultural thing—a normal part of life.

At a certain age, having your stuff up on the refrigerator just doesn’t cut it any more. The Audience must expand beyond the home. Peer appreciation, carefully directed, can have a strong and positive effect on motivating the young writer. Visit any school classroom and what is on the walls? Children’s work. Universally, kids love to read what other kids have done; it’s an encouragement and a comparison. Skillful teachers give frequent opportunities for children to share their work, either in full class forum or small groups. While many schools have newspapers which sample the creative efforts of various students, some teachers even publish a class “Magnum Opus” or “Great Work” as an end-of-the-year collection, featuring the very best story or essay from each student. For homeschool students, a “writing club” may provide some of the positive peer influence that extends beyond the family. With the explosion of technology, a web page to showcase the work of a family or club allows for an ever-expanding Audience, potentially reaching the ends of the earth.

Why write, really? Ultimately, it must be because someone has something he or she wants to communicate. Eventually, assignments like stories, essays, book reports, and research projects must give way to self-imposed goals; adults write for a purpose. We write to educate, enlighten, entertain, persuade, assist, convert. There are problems to address and joys to demonstrate, hopes to elicit and dreams to inspire. If your children have become confident and competent

with the basic skills of putting words on paper in an organized and interesting way, you will see them jump at the opportunity to use these skills to make a difference in the lives of their friends, be effective in their work, and serve God. It then becomes your job to help students find work that requires writing, opportunities to write to local officials or newspapers on issues that matter, reasons to correspond with prison inmates or friends with problems, and ways to submit stories with a message to publications with a purpose. They can even self-publish booklets or newsletters. In the end, students will continue to write as they see the potential to make a difference in the greater Audience of the world.

Presenting techniques and creating assignments while giving gentle correction and criticism is vital for success, but beyond that, the teacher must know how to motivate children to continue to practice their skills. Writing is much like music; you can know what to do, but until doing it has become natural, fluent, and relatively easy, the ability does not truly exist. Depending on the age and aptitude of your children, motivating them may be a simple matter or a Herculean task. A variety of tools will be needed, but more than anything else, you will want a continuous, genuine, and penetrating smile. Although your students may eventually want to write for their peers, or to change their world, you, the teacher and parent, are their first and most important Audience.