

Helping children get up and go

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When children lack motivation and drive, their parents can be lost as to how to help them regain direction.

Education consultant and parenting coach **Joseph Driessen** told Kathryn Ryan that in these situations some children can be defeated by their lack of self-management, amid other possible problems like learning difficulties.

“They're just depressed because they can't make themselves follow through. They can't make themselves tidy up their work. They can't make themselves remember what to do. They go to school disorganised.

“Or some small children are just caught into a sort of an ADHD pattern of completely kind of being hyperactive and not calming down and not doing anything and eventually, both the parent and the child give up because they lack the skills or the system isn't working.”



Listen to the full interview with Joseph Driessen

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/audio/2018718107/helping-children-get-up-and-go>

A lack of belief in one's self or lack of confidence can arise after repeated failures, Driessen says.

Eventually, the child can fall into a pit of realisation that they will not be able to accomplish anything and gives up, he says. Ultimately, their energy and feelings become negative.

But there are also children with attention deficit disorder, Driessen says, whose neurological system is far more focused on the immediate outcomes rather than the prioritising the most important goals and tasks.

“And so you get sidetracked, you don't read your list, you forget your diary, you don't pack your bags because something else takes the place and you just get caught in the moment and you think, 'well, that's fine that's what my brain told me to do, but now I forgotten this'.

“Repeated failures of that, that can cause a child to become deeply demotivated.”

As a result of a lack of coherent planning and execution of important tasks, he says teenagers can feel down about sustained failure and not progressing in areas at school.

Strategies to help

However, there are ways for parents to help children who fall into that predicament. Driessen says the first thing to note is sometimes in these situations even the parent feels defeated.

“But what the children really most respond to, what I found and what the research finds, is that actually the adult takes it seriously and sits down with them and initiates a series of conversations initially, then actions.

“So a conversation might be 'well this is not working, you're doing year 11 NCEA, you haven't started anything, it's a shambles, and we've tried, let's sit down and work hard, and then let's have some expectations of change, and let's do that together'.”

The parent's determination, guidance and analysis of what's really happening gives the child hope, he says.

“Goal setting is very important, but each goal should have a reasonable stage for what they can do, and they should tick them off and feel that we're getting there.

“Goals really need to be based on their dreams on what they really want to achieve ... you can't ram goals down people's throats.”

And getting that conversation going is a good start, but it must be followed up with insistence for accountability to wake the child up a little, he says.

Driessen suggests parents also enforce better routines – going to bed at a certain hour, unpacking at a certain time, and so forth.

“The second thing is you got to realise that some children can't - they're just so scattered, it's not their fault. They can't concentrate on what's most important now, and so very short lists with colours and big letters on the fridge, changing them in the morning, in the afternoon, evening, because some children just can't cope with 10 things, they just need three.

“Or little reminder cards, or kneeling down at the child's level and looking them in the eye and say, remember, what is the most important thing you're supposed to be doing now?”

Another approach Driessen recommends is the Montessori system, whereby children organise themselves and become more self-aware by writing down when they did certain tasks and for how long.

He says these tactics will create a more simple and explicit communication system - lists, cards, labels – so that the child can eventually learn to manage themselves.

Driessen also notes it's critical that this process is ongoing – that they revisit where they've reached, with frequent catch-ups or chats – otherwise there's a risk of them backsliding.

Some parents misunderstand how much guidance, structure, accountability and encouragement children need, he says.

Positive reinforcement in between is key

On the other hand, some parents can also become over-stressed or disappointed to the point where they only focus on when the child fails.

It pays to be positive with research showing that we are designed to follow positive reinforcement, Driessen says.

“You might say to a child who's had quite a bad day, 'well, some parts of the day went really, really well, and I'm really happy about that'. So you keep on focusing on what goes well, and how they could improve and you keep on saying, 'well, you're just growing up and you're just getting a little bit better'.

“Because once a child has that self image of 'I'm a failure', they will be surprised and will not accept your compliments ... But once a child thinks, 'well maybe I'm getting better at whatever it is', then you can say, 'well, let's try and be better next time'.”

To encourage and get that child feeling they're accomplishing, parents can try to focus on picking the small battles first, he says.

“Some children actually are quite stubborn, once they enter this dysfunctional behaviour, they are not going to do it. In the worst cases, the parents get really angry and then has a massive row and then not doing anything and the whole thing starts again. But it's better to actually start small.”

For example if a parent is concerned their child is not doing homework and exams are coming up, they can start by telling them that without any exceptions at such a time they will unpack their bag. They may be stubborn and ‘forget, he says, but the adult must remain firm on their resolution and try to win in this “battle of wills”.

“They reluctantly sit down at the table and do it, unpack that bag and then [the adult] says, 'well, that's really good ... okay, now the next thing is that we're going to do...' so you carry on.

“You win one small battle, you make it a habit, and then you make the next a small habit, and you win that. Sometimes the initial winning, that the parent actually prevails and the child gives in, actually is what the child wanted. They wanted an adult to take charge, set limits, obtain them.”

Reference Nine to Noon

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