

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION

Motivation refers to our reasons for acting or behaving in a particular way. Motivation can be divided into two categories or types: external (or extrinsic) motivation and internal (or intrinsic) motivation.

Extrinsic (external) motivation occurs when we are motivated to perform behaviour or engage in an activity in order to earn a reward, or in order to avoid punishment. Examples of behaviours that are the result of extrinsic motivation include: studying in order to get a good mark; cleaning up in order to avoid getting into trouble; participating in a sport in order to win an award; competing in a contest in order to win a prize; and/or engaging in a particular behaviour in order to meet parental expectations or avoid punishment. In each of these examples, the behaviour is motivated by a desire to gain a reward or the desire to avoid a negative outcome¹.

The use of extrinsic motivation is advantageous in that it works quickly, requires little effort and/or preparation and does not require an extensive understanding of each child, as an individual, in order to be utilised. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation often provides a distraction from the desired behaviour or activity itself, becomes ineffective over a long period of time and disappears altogether once the reward is removed. Research also suggests that extrinsic rewards can have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation and that extrinsic motivational strategies should therefore be used carefully and sparingly².

Intrinsic (or internal) motivation occurs when we engage in an activity or behaviour because we enjoy it or because we find it interesting. Examples of actions that are the result of intrinsic motivation include: participating in a sport because you find the activity enjoyable; solving a crossword puzzle because you find the challenge fun and exciting; reading because you would like to learn something new; and/or cleaning up because you enjoy being in a neat and tidy environment. In each of these instances, the person's behaviour is motivated by an internal desire to participate in an activity for its own sake (rather than for the desire of an external reward)¹.

The advantages of intrinsic motivation are that it can be both long-lasting and self-sustaining. Efforts to build this type of motivation can be used to promote student learning by focussing on a particular subject rather than rewards or punishments. Intrinsic motivation strategies may however be slow to change a person's behaviour as they require lengthy preparation, special attention and a variety of approaches².

While most people would suggest that intrinsic motivation is best, it is not always possible in each and every situation. In some cases, people simply have no internal desire to engage in an activity. Excessive rewards may be problematic, but when used appropriately, extrinsic motivators can be a useful tool. For example, extrinsic motivation can be used to get people to complete a work task or school assignment in which they have no internal interest¹. For a list of references and links to more information on this topic please visit <http://www.christinedarney.co.za/Psych-Ed/psych-ed.html>

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