



To help a child become more motivated, consider asking him or her how he or she can improve and help the child see that mistakes are part of learning. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



Jane Ng

STRENGTHEN BELIEF IN SELF

A positive belief system in a child, cultivated through encouragement and influence, can help him or her work enthusiastically towards achieving a goal

When a child believes he or she is not good in his or her studies and has low self-confidence, the child is unlikely to want to work hard in school.

This may then lead to poor results and that causes a negative spiral which continues to impact his or her motivation.

Thus, a child's belief system – formed from a variety of factors including home background and school environment – is instrumental to him or her being academically motivated, a study here found.

Called *Motivating The Academically Unmotivated: The Why's And The How's*, it looked at the reasons teenagers are not motivated to do well in mathematics and what can be done about it.

More than 7,000 students from the Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) streams and 220 teachers in 30 secondary schools from 2012 to 2017 were surveyed.

The study's author, Professor John Wang, head of the Motivation in Educational Research Laboratory at the National Institute of Education, said although the study focused on mathematics – the weakest subject for many of the students surveyed – the findings can be applied to other subjects.

It found that several factors affect academic motivation:

SELF BELIEF

Explaining why a child's belief system is crucial to his or her motivation, Prof Wang said the child's belief system influences the way he or she approaches the task.

"These students have accepted the fact that they are not good in mathematics, so their self-confidence and self-efficacy is very low," he said.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his ability to solve a problem, attain a goal or complete a task.

With that belief system, a child may pick only the easiest question to do in an assignment because he or she believes that is all he or she is capable of doing.

"The child may think, I'm so

dumb, I will just choose the easiest question. Or if they choose a difficult task, it is just to prove they don't have talent," he added.

But one way to turn that around is to encourage children to have a mastery goal instead of a performance goal. This means assessing how much they have improved over a period of time, instead of comparing their results to their friends', said Prof Wang.

So, for instance, ask a child how he or she can improve and help him or her see that mistakes are part of learning.

"Children with a mastery goal will see that the more I make mistakes, the more I learn. There is no end to how much I can improve myself. So long as I keep on working, I can keep on improving," he said.

ENVIRONMENT

This includes the school and classroom climate, said Prof Wang.

"Many students in the Normal stream are labelled as not so bright. The moment they go into the classroom, there is a certain kind of expectation – a low expectation – that could also have an impact on their motivation," he said.

Hence the Education Ministry's decision to introduce subject-based banding instead of having streams, will help to remove the stereotype, he said.

PEER INFLUENCE

Another important factor is the influence of friends, especially for students in secondary school.

"Imagine a whole class of students who are not interested in studying. If you are the only one who works hard, you become the odd one out," he said.

TEACHERS

In the classroom setting, teachers play the most important role.

What teachers say and do in classrooms have a direct and almost immediate impact on student motivation.

To enhance students' motivation, teachers need to have a very good understanding of what is

motivation and how they can go about to change the motivation of the students, added Prof Wang.

He said that teachers and parents often ask him how they can motivate their charges, but he said that was the wrong question to ask.

"When you ask the question how can I motivate a child, you are taking the ownership away from the student. We need to give the ownership back to students.

"Instead, they should ask, 'How can I create a conducive environment in which students can motivate themselves,'" he said.

This stems from the belief that every child has the inner resources to motivate himself or herself.

"When kids are young, you can see they are intrinsically motivated towards playing something they are really interested in, for example, a musical instrument or sport. So every child has an ability to motivate himself or herself," he said.

Teachers and parents need to first believe that students are capable of motivating themselves.

He suggested minimising the use of reward and punishment methods because they are not useful in motivating a child in the long run.

Instead, parents and teachers should work on enhancing the incremental belief of students, preferably from a young age.

"Let them know they can reach any level they want so long as they work hard and set appropriate goals. Inculcate this belief system in our kids from young, that there is no limit to their potential," Prof Wang said.

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