

Ditch the reward, nurture the interest

Build children's competence in a subject and give leeway on revision schedules to encourage them to be self-motivated, say experts



Jane Ng
Correspondent

While some parents may cut down on their children's activities to help them better prepare for a national examination, others believe that continuing with a favourite activity could motivate them to work harder.

When Mrs Jessie Tan's elder child, Sozo, was in Primary 6 in 2022, he continued to play table tennis every Saturday at a community centre, even as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) approached.

Mrs Tan, 40, a pre-school principal, says giving him time to do what he enjoys had spurred him to do his best.

"Playing table tennis gives him the motivation to be consistent in studying, as he will finish homework before playtime," says Mrs Tan, who is married to Mr Malcolm Tan, 51, a luthier.

They also have an 11-year-old daughter, Hannah, and a family activity they do together regularly is playing board games.

Mrs Tan also believes in letting Sozo plan his own revision schedule, but she helped him to shortlist secondary schools offering table tennis and guided him on their cut-off scores.

The 13-year-old is now thriving at Anglican High School, where he is in the school's table tennis team.

Mr Elvin Foong, whose son Nathan is sitting the PSLE this year, also does not plan his children's revisions.

While Mr Foong, 41, who is self-employed, takes the 12-year-old to check out secondary school open houses, he leaves Nathan's studies mostly to his teachers.

As a parent, he supports Nathan by making sure the boy takes breaks and gets family time. He also helps if Nathan has questions and, at times, brings him a drink during revision.

"There's so much expectation placed on our kids for this exam. People we meet would say, 'PSLE year, very stressful, right?' If parents buy into that narrative too, it really doesn't help our kids," says Mr Foong, who also has a 10-year-old daughter, Phoebe, with his wife, Esther.

Unlike Mrs Tan and Mr Foong, some parents may be more forceful in trying to motivate their children to study, but some commonly used methods could actually backfire in the long run, say experts.

WHY YOU MAY BE MOTIVATING YOUR CHILD THE WRONG WAY

Parents may offer rewards for good academic performance, but experts say this could do more harm than good.

Professor John Wang, founder of the Motivation in Educational Research Lab at the National Institute of Education, says it is more important to build a child's innate desire to want to do well.



Offering extrinsic rewards does the opposite even if a goal is met in the short term, for instance, the child does well in a test.

"You are switching attention from developing passion in a subject to wanting to get a prize," says Prof Wang, whose team translates research on motivational issues in education into tips for educators and parents.

Ms Jana Dawson, director of academic affairs at The School of Positive Psychology, agrees that rewarding a child is ineffective in the long run.

"If a child is innately curious about something and he or she wants to explore, the worst thing a parent can do is to reward the child extrinsically," she says.

Research over the last 20 years shows that different types of motivation will result in different experiences, performance and well-being of students, says Prof Wang.

There are two main types of motivation - controlled and autonomous.

Controlled motivation, where parents force, threaten or shame a

child, brought about lower performance when it was done in a sports setting, leading to athletes having difficulty in coping and dropping out, he says.

"Many Asian parents tend to use controlled motivation, perhaps because they see the kids' performance as a reflection of themselves, so they feel ashamed if the kids don't do well," says Prof Wang.

He notes that one drawback of forcing a child to study is that if the parents are not there, the child will not study on his or her own.

In addition, threats like "If you get low marks, I'm going to cane you" or "I'm so ashamed of your marks, don't talk to me" are remarks that indirectly lower motivation, he says.

On the other hand, people who are autonomously motivated show greater persistence and improved performance. One way to develop this is to nurture a love of a subject, such as by letting a child delve deeper into an area he or she is interested in, for example, in robotics.

CONTINUED on C2



Instead of planning revisions, Mr Elvin Foong supports his son Nathan (both above), who is sitting the Primary School Leaving Examination in 2023, in his studies by making sure the 12-year-old takes breaks. They are seen on the left with Mr Foong's wife Esther and their younger daughter Phoebe.

ST PHOTOS: MARK CHEONG

Empower your child by developing his strengths



(From left) Mr Malcolm Tan, his son Sozo, wife Jessie and daughter Hannah spend time together as a family playing board games. ST PHOTO: RYAN CHIONG



Every child wants to do well. What parents can do is to create the environment needed because if a child develops interest in a subject, he or she will naturally want to learn more on his or her own.



PROFESSOR JOHN WANG, founder of the Motivation in Educational Research Lab at the National Institute of Education



If a child is innately curious about something and he or she wants to explore, the worst thing a parent can do is to reward the child extrinsically.



MS JANA DAWSON, director of academic affairs at The School of Positive Psychology

FROM C1

But it can be counter-productive for parents to sign their children up for too many classes, especially those the little ones are not interested in.

“If the child asks for the classes, there is no harm. But if parents are the ones who dictate and the child doesn’t pay attention, he will not benefit,” adds Prof Wang.

Another common mistake parents make is to compare the child with others. While the comment may seem innocuous, it does not motivate the child.

“Parents need to be in a position to support their child’s learning. We can’t expect kids to be good in every subject,” says Prof Wang.

PROVEN STRATEGIES TO MOTIVATE YOUR CHILD

Parents can build intrinsic motivation in their children by ensuring three psychological needs are met – competence, autonomy and relatedness, says Prof Wang.

- Competence: Being competent will help the child build

confidence in the subject. One way is to get him or her help if he or she is struggling in the subject, and let the child experience success by setting small milestones.

- **Autonomy:** A child needs to have ownership of his or her learning by having a choice of what and when to study, rather than being forced to do so by the parent.
- **Relatedness:** This refers to the relationship between parent and

child, and how it should never be used as a threat to get the child to study.

Says Prof Wang: “Parents need to cut ties between grades and relationships. The child must know he or she is more important than any grade he or she comes back with.”

If the three needs are provided and satisfied, the child will be more likely to be intrinsically motivated, he adds.

“Every child wants to do well.

ST forum on preparing for PSLE

If you want more ideas on how to support your Primary 6 child, The Straits Times will be organising a forum on PSLE preparation at Ngee Ann Polytechnic on May 20 at 10am.

There will be a plenary session with Mr Sng Chern Wei, deputy director-general of Education (Curriculum) from the Ministry of Education, who will give parents an overview of the PSLE scoring

system and share how parents can better support their children for the exam.

There will be two breakout sessions conducted by experts on English and mathematics, who will guide parents on how they can help their child in these subjects.

Look out for more details when registration starts on April 27.

For more information, e-mail stevents@sph.com.sg

What parents can do is to create the environment needed because if a child develops interest in a subject, he or she will naturally want to learn more on his or her own,” he says.

He advises parents to nurture enjoyment because when a child is absorbed in an activity, he or she will do it even without the parents around.

“Conversely, if parents shame the child, there will be negative feelings associated with the subject,” says Prof Wang.

HOW TO MOTIVATE A CHILD WHO IS NOT DOING WELL

The basic principle of motivating academically low-performing pupils is the same as for other pupils because studies have shown that this group of children also want to do well, says Prof Wang.

But they may require more time, patience and involvement from parents.

If a child lacks competency in a subject, parents need to find out whether it is because of a challenging topic, an inability to understand certain concepts or a

lack of exam skills.

Work actively with the child’s teacher or look for resources that might help.

“If you just give instructions like, ‘Go and study’, it will not help. If you are personally involved, the child will feel that his or her parents are supportive and not giving up on him or her,” he says.

Parents may need to provide guidance and structure by explaining to the child why he or she needs to improve the grade and what he or she needs to do, for instance, reducing distractions or learning key facts well.

Ms Dawson from The School of Positive Psychology recommends that parents adopt a strengths-based approach by focusing on and harnessing the strengths of children instead of constantly trying to fix their weaknesses.

Develop their strengths and use them to boost the area that needs development, she advises.

Doing this is empowering for the child because it will impact his or her confidence, resilience and energy levels.

For a child who is weaker in mathematics, look for his or her

strengths in other areas for help. For instance, a creative child might learn better if he uses objects or materials like Play-Doh to represent a maths problem.

A child who is good at social connections may thrive if he or she has a study buddy for the subject.

A child who enjoys leading others may find it useful to explain how to solve problem sums to a friend.

Once children are aware of their strengths, they will approach areas of weaknesses with more confidence, says Ms Dawson.

Another way to motivate a child who is struggling academically is to cultivate a growth mindset – a belief system that he or she can develop and improve through effort.

Ultimately, experts point out that parents should guide their children to see grades in perspective and accept that results are not going to define a person.

“If parents understand that, they will more willingly support their child and this can be very motivating for the child,” says Prof Wang.

janeng@sph.com.sg