

**How Do You Motivate a Teen?
Yes, It Is Possible!**
Excerpt from the book Positive Discipline for Teenagers
By Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott

When parents ask, “How do I motivate my teen?” they usually mean, “How do I get my teen to do what I want? How do I get her to have some balance in her life? How do I get him off the computer, get outside, or do just about anything except sitting around doing nothing?”

Encouragement is the key to motivation. Every parenting tool we are sharing in this Positive Discipline for Teenagers book is designed to encourage and motivate teens. In this article we’ll cover Six surefire Teen Motivators: compliments, humor, let’s make a deal/collateral, motivation through involvement, joint problem-solving and follow-through.

Compliments

People do better when they feel better. There’s nothing like getting a compliment for something you feel good about or being affirmed for who you are to improve motivation. This is true for everyone, but especially for teens, who often hear endless criticism, nagging, and complaining about their poor performance. If you’re used to using praise as a motivator, you may have a tough time finding something praiseworthy with your teen. That’s why we suggest encouragement because it works even when your kids are in the dumps and making mistakes.

One place to make sure everyone gets a compliment or appreciation is the family meeting. If you have weekly meetings and start each meeting with something positive, your teens might want to be at the meeting for that alone. A fifteen-year-old boy said his favorite time of the week was the appreciation/compliments he got at the family meeting.

During the week, look for ways to let your kids know how unique they are, what you appreciate about them, how adorable they were as little kids. Tell them stories about what they used to do when they were younger. Ask them if there’s something they wish people would say about them or like about them or notice about them, and then make sure you tell them exactly what they want to hear. They will like hearing it, even if they told you what they wanted.

Humor

Teenagers enjoy a sense of humor and respond to it much better than to lectures and nagging. The following situations illustrate how parents use humor to invite cooperation and to lighten things up.

When a teenage girl forgot to set the table, her mother served the dinner directly onto the table. Everyone laughed at the absurdity of the situation. The table was set on time from then on.

Peter was a father of three teens who used betting and guessing games to motivate the children and add humor to a situation. When Peter noticed the chores weren’t getting done as agreed, he’d say,

"Someone forgot to do something they agreed to. I'll give a dollar to the first person who guesses what it is." The teens ran around the house trying to find out who the culprit was so they could win a dollar.

Another time Peter said, "I'll bet two dollars you can't finish your yard work before the football game starts." He was effective using bets and games because they were infrequent and unexpected. Had Peter tried using bets as rewards and bribes, his children would have felt less respected because he would have inferred the only reason his teens helped the family was for the money.

Let's Make A Deal and Using Collateral

"I'll make you a deal. If you walk the dog for me on weekdays, I'll do a special favor for you on weekends."

"I'll make you a deal. I'll pick you and your friends up from the movie if you can find another parent to take you there."

"I'll make you a deal. I'll match whatever you save for that new sweater (guitar, game, etc.)"

Collateral works really well with teens. If they want to borrow something of yours, they need to give you collateral which you will return when they return the item. Good collateral might be a favorite piece of clothing, an iPod, an iPad, a cell phone, etc. It needs to be an item that has value to your teen.

Motivation Through Involvement

Dana shared the following at a parenting class: "My daughter, Sage, is doing exceptionally well in school. She is getting the highest score on most tests, and she is not feeling challenged. At the last Parent Teacher Conference she asked for more challenging work from her teacher. Other members of the group wanted to know what Dana did to motivate Sage to do so well."

Dana then shared the following: "I have learned that what works well with Sage is explaining to her the benefit of doing well. I use every opportunity I can to point them out to her. When she learns something new, I take it to the next level with more information and then point out to her that is what is so cool about learning, that you learn one new thing and it opens up a whole new world."

Joint Problem Solving Works with Teens

Four Steps for Joint Problem Solving

1. Teen shares his or her issues and goals.
2. Parent shares his or her issues and goals.
3. If goals of teen and parent are far apart, brainstorm to find options.
4. Teen and parent pick an option they can both live with and try it out for a short time.

Follow-Through

The teen motivators we have discussed so far, are fairly quick and easy. Follow-through is more complicated and requires more guidance on your part, but it is worth the effort because it is a surefire

method that really helps teens keep their agreements. Follow-through is an excellent alternative to authoritarian methods or permissiveness. With follow-through, you can meet the needs of the situation while maintaining dignity and respect for all concerned. Follow-through is also a way to help teens learn the life skills they need in order to feel good about themselves while learning to be contributing members of society.

Follow-through is a respectful, four-step approach to parenting teens that teaches cooperation, life skills, and responsibility in spite of resistance. It works whether you are trying to move your teen away from the computer, join the family, or keep up responsibilities to themselves and the family. The key is that follow-through involves you, because you are the only one who does the follow-through. The result is that your teen also follows through, but rarely without your participation. Think of this as one of your main co-pilot duties.

The Four Steps for Effective Follow-Through

1. Have a friendly discussion with your teen to gather information about what is happening regarding the problem. (Listen first and then share your thoughts.)
2. Brainstorm solutions with your teen. (Use your humor and throw in some exaggerations.) Choose one that both you and your teen can agree to. Finding a solution you both like may take some negotiating, because your favorite solution may be different from your teen's favorite.
3. Agree on a date and time deadline.
4. Understand teens well enough to know that the deadline probably won't be met and simply follow through on the agreement by kindly and firmly holding your teen accountable.

Before we provide examples of effective follow-through, it is important to understand the traps that defeat follow-through.

Four Traps That Defeat Follow-Through

1. Believing that teens think the way you think and have the same priorities you have.
2. Getting into judgments and criticism instead of sticking to the issue.
3. Not getting agreements in advance that include a specific time deadline.
4. Not maintaining dignity and respect for yourself and your teen

In our workshops, to help parents learn the art of follow-through and to show them that it really does work, we often ask for a volunteer to role-play a teen who has not kept an agreement to do a task, such as mowing the lawn. We then point to the Four Steps for Effective Follow-Through and ask the volunteer to pretend we have already gone through them as a parent and a teen. To set up the role-play, we ask the teen to sit in a chair and pretend he or she is playing a video game. The deadline has arrived, but the task is not done. We then role-play the adult who follows-through by using the following Four Hints for Effective Follow-Through.

Four Hints for Effective Follow-Through

1. Keep comments simple, concise, and friendly. ("I notice you didn't do your task. Would you please do that now?")
2. In response to objections, ask, "What was our agreement?"

3. In response to further objections, shut your mouth and use nonverbal communication. (Point to your watch after every argument. Smile knowingly. Give a hug and point to your watch again.) It helps to understand the concept of "less is more." The less you say the more effective you will be. The more you say, the more ammunition you give your kids for an argument—which they will win every time.
4. When your teen concedes (sometimes with great annoyance), say, "Thank you for keeping our agreement."

One thing we ask of the volunteer role-playing the teen is to be in the present moment. By this we mean the volunteer should respond to what is being done now rather than responding in ways that a teen would react to disrespectful methods. When the volunteer does this, it is amazing how quickly the "teen" comes to agreement (after a little resistance).

Kind and Firm Parenting Skills To Remember

1. You can motivate your teens with encouragement which is very different from trying to get your teens to do what you want.
2. Humor, collateral, let's make a deal, and involvement are positive motivation tools.
3. There is one surefire way to get your kids to keep their agreements, and it's called follow-through. It may be a lot of work for you in the beginning, but it will be worth every minute of the time you spend to train both you and your teen to use better habits.
4. Read the four steps, the four traps, and the four hints for successful follow-through again and again, because they are very different from how you would normally respond as a parent—and as a human.
5. You must be there at the first deadline to set up the follow-through. It won't work in the long run without you there in the beginning.
6. If you whine or complain that using follow-through is too much work, track how much time you spend reminding and nagging your teen instead. Notice the effect that nagging has on you and on your teen. Keep a checklist of how often the task you are nagging about actually gets done. We call this a reality check.
7. Follow-through will help you use fewer words and your kids will hear you better.
8. Don't hesitate to prepare in advance and maybe even practice with a friend. You can always listen to the "Empowering Teenagers and Yourself in the Process" audiotapes for a live demonstration. It helps! (They can be found on our web site at www.positivediscipline.com)
9. We do not recommend making contracts with your teens. If you need to write information down as a reminder for both of you, that is respectful and effective. Setting up a contract means you are treating your teenager like a client or an adversary. If you do sign a contract, don't be surprised by your teen's attitudes.