

LOVE OF LEARNING

THRIVING INDICATORS



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Love of Learning

Definition

Love of Learning is one of five competencies, that together, determine one's ability to accomplish what is needed to interact effectively with people and institutions.¹ Love of Learning entails having a passionate interest in gaining knowledge about the world and one's place in it; working hard in school to learn and improve skills; being curious and pursuing subjects of interest; applying learning strengths; finding ways to address learning challenges; and having a growth instead of fixed mindset.

Several key concepts that influence this Indicator of Thriving include:

- Intrinsic motivation, or effort derived from internal, as opposed to external, incentives.
- Persistence and resiliency, or the willingness and ability to respond positively to challenges and setbacks.
- Growth mindset, or the belief that one's intelligence and abilities can improve with practice & effort, using the right strategies and seeking help, rather than believing that they are predetermined or fixed.

In one study, "students whose perception of [their] competence increased over the course of the semester rated the subject as more interesting at the end of the semester than they did at the beginning."

Dr. Carol Dweck

Why is Love of Learning Important?

Youth who demonstrate intrinsic motivation, persist in spite of challenges, and have a growth mindset—the three main components of Love of Learning—are much more likely to achieve goals that are important to them. Youth with a Love of Learning demonstrate:

- Greater school success
"Researchers have shown that when youth study because they enjoy it, their learning is deeper, richer, and longer lasting. They are also more persistent, more creative, and more eager to do challenging work."²
- Better emotional health
"Youth who want to learn feel less anxious and resentful than students coerced by bribes or threats, while achieving just as much or more."³

Youth with a love of learning may also have lower levels of depression because they develop skills to overcome obstacles, rather than ruminate over problems and setbacks.

The Gap

Research demonstrates that a lack of motivation to study and learn is widespread among youth in the United States, and that love of learning declines steadily from third through ninth grade.³

How Can Adults Help Youth Develop a Love of Learning?

#1: Increase Feelings of Competence

"Nothing motivates youth more than a feeling of competence."³ Feelings of competence do not merely come from achieving success, but rather, from achieving success at challenging tasks. These are tasks that require youth to develop new skills, but are not so difficult that they discourage them. Conversely, if the task is too easy, youth

are less likely to exert effort or find rewards in accomplishment.³

There are several actions that parents, teachers, mentors, and coaches can take to increase feelings of competence, and increase love of learning:

- Help youth identify their strengths, and apply strengths to develop a sense of competence in a variety of areas.
- Help youth set meaningful, achievable, and challenging goals, break down larger goals into smaller goals and develop good strategies to work towards goals."⁴
- Provide immediate, specific feedback.
- Communicate high expectations with assurance that youth can meet them.

Many youth struggle with feelings of competence in learning settings with different cultures, language, social class, and norms for engagement than their home backgrounds. It can be tough to feel confident, or "smart". Sometimes adult guides fill the void, labeling youth as "smart" in terms of their perceptions of youth strengths and potential; unfortunately, research shows this can leave youth more vulnerable to self-doubt when facing challenges in the future.⁸ Therefore, ability labels, like "smart" or "talented", should only be used in broad discussion to encourage a youth's belief in his or her competency, and tightly tied to the frame of growth mindset. Eliminate "you're smart" references when commenting about specific achievements done well; this is your chance to praise effort & specific strategies. To promote a love of learning, it's important to explicitly connect success with the wonders that come from effort, and the fun and learning that comes from challenge.

#2: Allow Autonomy and Choice

Youth, like adults, are more highly motivated by activities that they choose rather than activities they are told to do. To build youth motivation:

- Ask youth what they want to do rather than dictating what they should do.³
- Give youth control over their learning processes while providing the appropriate amount of structure. Provide the minimum level of monitoring and rules required, as such limitations can undermine their feelings of control and decrease motivation.³

#3: With Results - Praise Effort & Strategies!

After seven experiments with hundreds of children, Dr. Dweck's research resulted in clear findings: Praising youth's intelligence harms their motivation and performance."⁵ One of her experiments illustrates why praising effort is so important:

"We gave each adolescent a set of ten fairly difficult problems from a nonverbal IQ test. We praised some of the students for their ability, saying 'Wow, you got eight right. That's a really good score. You must be smart at this.' Other students were praised for their effort, and told 'You must have worked really hard'." Results indicated that when students were praised for effort, 90 percent of them wanted the challenging new task from which they could learn. Students praised for their ability, on the other hand, rejected challenging tasks over easier ones.⁵

Note the detrimental effect of praise on love of learning, when the praise associates innate intelligence with getting something right. Of course, this focus on "getting it right" drives down risk-taking and flattens the learning curve. There is a distinction between this use of "smart" and a mentor using "smart" in a broad discussion aimed at increasing a youth's sense of self-worth and competency.

Some helpful examples of praising effort include:

- "I like the way you tried all kinds of strategies on that math problem until you finally got it. You thought of a

lot of different ways to do it and found the one that worked!”

- “I know school used to be easy for you and you used to feel like the smart kid all the time. But the truth is that you weren’t using your brain to the fullest. I’m really excited about how you’re stretching yourself now and working to grow your brain by learning hard things.”⁵

#4: Set Learning Goals

“Studies have demonstrated repeatedly that youth with learning goals both learn better and enjoy it more.”³ Learning goals encourage youth to focus on mastery and learning, which are more under the youth’s control, rather than focusing on getting a high score, which is out of the youth’s control. The latter can cause wasteful perfectionism and shallow learning.

Adults can encourage motivation through learning goals by:

- Emphasizing the value of learning, and de-emphasizing external evaluation of performance.
- Giving substantive feedback that shows students where they were successful, why they improved, and how they can improve further.

#5: Avoid Extrinsic Rewards

Extrinsic rewards can undermine a youth’s intrinsic motivation. If used incorrectly, young people can become “addicted” to extrinsic rewards, and they may only perform tasks when there is a reward, even for those who were previously intrinsically motivated.³ Adults avoid this by:

- Using tangible extrinsic rewards as little as possible, using the most modest of rewards, and ending the offer of rewards as soon as possible.³

- Making rewards contingent upon the quality of work or improvement on a challenging task, not simply on engaging in an activity.⁶
- Giving rewards some of the time (partial reinforcement), rather than continuously.

#6: Encourage Persistence

Self-disciplined children are more likely to work hard and persist for long-term rewards.”⁷ Adults can promote persistent behavior by:

- Sharing role models of people who experienced initial difficulty followed by gradual success to demonstrate that persistent effort can help overcome difficulties. Reinforce the belief that success is possible.
- Promoting the feeling of belonging among minority students, especially in the face of adversity. This can take the form of communicating that many others experience similar adversity or simply saying, “You belong here. I know you can succeed.”
- Communicating your high standards, and that you believe each young person can achieve them.

#7: Connect School Learning to Sparks

When youth make connections between school content and their interests, they become more motivated. Tie content to youths’ sparks and increase their love of learning.³

#8: Develop a Sense of Purpose

Research by Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations shows that when students see a purpose to their learning, they are more motivated to succeed. Help youth reflect on how what they’re learning, whether a topic, skill or strategy, is relevant, and how the effort serves a greater purpose.⁹

Footnotes

- Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 47.
- Deborah Stipek and Kathy Seal. *Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2001, page 4.
- Stipek and Seal, 2, 4, 13-17, 18, 22-23, 42, 45-46, 127, 132-133, 148.
- Allison Master. *Increasing Achievement Motivation in Children: A Conceptual Analysis of Dissertation Area*, Stanford University, October 6, 2008, page 20.
- Dweck, 72, 175, 177-178.
- Ibid.
- Master, 18.
- The Art (and Science) of Giving Kids Feedback: 3 Rules to Remember Written by Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson Monday, 31 October 2011
- Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, “Mind the Gap: Meaningful Solutions to Multiple Gaps”, 2009 paper