

Ideas for Working with Hard-to-Motivate Students

-Try to determine why the student isn't working. While this sounds easy, it often isn't. Avoid making snap judgments when answering this question. Many times behaviors which appear to be based in defiance or laziness are actually a manifestation of the student's inability to cope with something or do something or a fear of looking foolish.

-In order to effectively work with these students, you must cultivate a relationship that allows them to trust you and feel safe from put-downs, snide comments and judgment. These students are highly sensitive to any perceived insult. From their point of view, it's safer to do nothing or to defy you than to risk being wrong and/or losing face. It helps them feel in control and therefore safe.

-Understand that you can't force a student to do anything. Always keep this in mind when planning for this student. You have to make what you want him/her to do more attractive than noncompliance.

-Make assignments interesting and fun in order to encourage participation. Provide for a variety of learning styles and methods for students to demonstrate what they learned.

-Tie instruction into students' lives as often as possible. Students are more likely to participate in activities which they perceive of as personally relevant.

-Whenever possible, ignore noncompliance and praise/reward compliance. Remember that this student is expecting you to be on his/her case, to put him/her down as being stupid and lazy. If you meet this expectation, you give the student "justification" for his refusal to do what you ask.

-Provide structured choices for the student. Apply what you know about learning styles to give the student choices in how to show you what he/she knows. Example: To demonstrate understanding of a history chapter, the student may do the chapter review, write a chapter summary, do a poster presentation or give a 2-3 minute speech. It is also helpful to allow the student to choose the order in which he/she does assignments. Examples: "John, you have math, spelling and handwriting to do this afternoon. You may do the assignments in whatever order you wish." "Would you like to use the restroom before or after you do your geography?"

-If the student is off task, use proximity control and/or non-verbal cues to alert him/her. Do not, however, beg, cajole or otherwise make a big deal out of the off-task behavior. Let the student know that you expect him/her to be working and impose the consequence (if there is one) for not working with as little fuss and verbalization as possible. Also, make sure you recognize quickly and frequently when the student is on task. Caution: Keep your recognition of the student's appropriate behavior subtle. Avoid making a big

announcement to the class like, “Look everybody! John is finally working! Isn’t that great?”

-Modify assignments. When working with these students, remember that, before you can deal with academic issues, you’ve got to get past the motivational ones. Therefore, when you first start trying to get Johnny to comply, give him assignments and directions that you know he can do easily and that are interesting for him. Your goal is to get the student into the habit of working. Something is better than nothing. As his/her ability to comply improves, gradually increase the difficulty of the work. Keep the easier work on hand, though, because the student will slip back into noncompliance from time to time, particularly during times of stress.

-Plan for excuses such as, “I forgot what the assignment was,” or “I didn’t understand what I was supposed to do.” An easy way to do this is to put major assignments on the board in the same place, have the student copy it into an assignment book and then bring the book to you so that you can check it. After you’ve checked that the assignment is written correctly, ask the student if he/she understands what he/she’s supposed to do (or have him/her tell you what he/she’s supposed to do) and then both of you initial it.

-Provide opportunities for the students to evaluate their own performance. Using checklist with statements such as “turned in, finished, just started” or “I did my best, I did OK, I didn’t do very well” allows students to recognize and critique themselves. This is very empowering! Be careful that, when you discuss the students’ self-evaluation with them, you do so non-judgmental and briefly. Ask non-judgmental questions if necessary but don’t interject your own opinions. You can do separate evaluations and then discuss any discrepancies with students later. Remember that the point of the exercise is to get students to think about what they’re doing. After a while, most students will take the procedure seriously. Keep in mind also, that none of us put in maximum effort on everything we do. Sometimes, an OK effort really is OK.

-A key for working with students who are hard to motivate is to give them real choices as often as possible. They NEED, not just want, to be autonomous. Forcing compliance just for the sake of compliance is something that most adults wouldn’t accept and neither do these students. Choices allow the student to be actively involved in their own education.

Things That Don’t Motive Difficult Students

- blanket ignoring
- pleading
- bargaining
- assisting to the point that staff is doing the student’s work
- threatening
- nagging
- displaying anger