



How to motivate and engage students who are gifted

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Motivation and engagement are relevant and important to all students. They are most frequently identified as issues for students who struggle with school and schoolwork. Motivation and engagement are often not recognised as potential barriers to students who are expected to find school and schoolwork easy. For example, gifted¹ students are not typically considered to be at motivational risk. However, step inside the world of the gifted student and motivation and engagement will often loom as central factors, particularly for underachieving gifted students. In this article, I explore some of the motivation and engagement issues relevant to gifted students as well as some strategies parents and educators can use to enhance the gifted child's motivation and engagement.

What are Motivation and Engagement?

Motivation is defined here as the energy, drive, interest, and inclination to learn and achieve. Engagement is defined here as the behaviours following from this energy, drive, interest, and inclination. Motivation and engagement are desirable ends in themselves (i.e., it is great to be motivated and engaged). Motivation and engagement are also a means to desirable ends such as achievement (i.e., motivation and engagement lead to great things).

In thinking about a student's motivation and engagement, it is important to understand that they are multidimensional. That is, there are many parts to motivation and engagement. This is important because we are much better able to assist students when we are specific about the

¹ This article uses the term "gifted" in a broad sense and encompasses students who are high in ability, talented, and prodigious. The author recognises the important differences and nuances across these terms, but uses the term "gifted" for ease of reference and expression throughout the article.

different parts of their lives for which they need help.

The Motivation and Engagement Wheel

To highlight key parts of motivation and engagement, I developed the Motivation and Engagement Wheel. As shown in Figure 1, there are four areas of motivation and engagement, and 11 facets of motivation and engagement within these four areas.

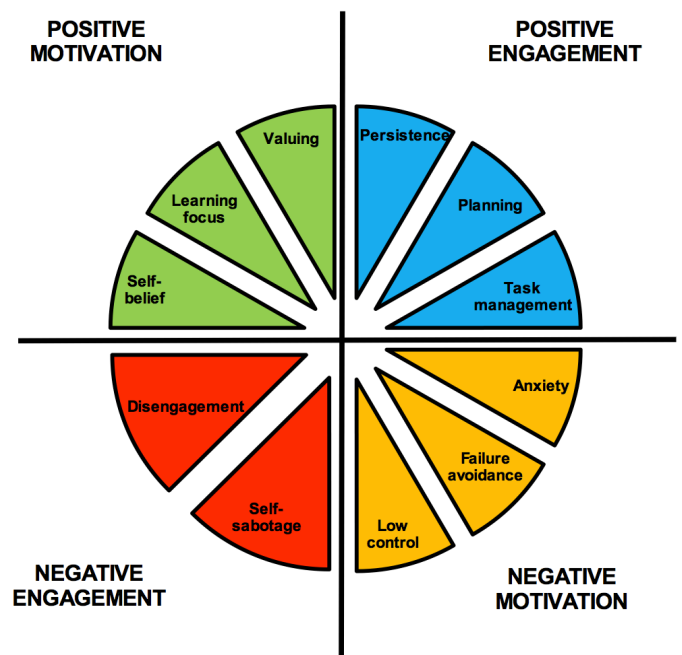


Figure 1. Motivation and Engagement Wheel (A.J. Martin, reproduced with permission from Lifelong Achievement Group—the Wheel can be downloaded as a PDF from the homepage of www.lifelongachievement.com).

Positive Motivation

- **Self-belief.** Self-belief is students' belief and confidence in their ability to understand or to do well in schoolwork, to meet challenges they face, and to perform to the best of their ability.
- **Valuing school.** Valuing school is the extent to which students believe what they learn at school is useful, relevant, meaningful,

and important.

- *Learning focus.* Students who are learning focused are interested in learning, developing new skills, improving, understanding new things, and doing a good job for its own sake—not just for rewards or the marks they will get for their efforts.

Positive Engagement

- *Persistence.* Persistence is shown by students when they keep trying to work out an answer or to understand a problem, even if that problem is difficult or challenging.
- *Planning (and monitoring).* Planning refers to how students plan assignments, projects, homework, and study. Monitoring refers to the strategies used to keep track of their progress.
- *Task management.* Task management refers to how students use their study or homework time, organise a study or homework timetable, and choose and arrange where they study or do homework.

Negative Motivation

- *Anxiety.* Anxiety has two parts: worrying and feeling nervous. Worrying is their fear about not doing very well in schoolwork, assignments, or tests. Feeling nervous is the uneasy or sick feeling students get when they think about or do their schoolwork, assignments, or tests.
- *Uncertain control.* Students have an uncertain or low sense of control when they are unsure how to do well or how to avoid doing poorly.
- *Failure avoidance (or fear of failure).* Students are failure avoidant when the

main reason they do their schoolwork is to avoid doing poorly or letting others down.

Negative Engagement

- *Self-sabotage.* Students self-sabotage when they do things that reduce their success at school. Examples are putting off doing an assignment or wasting time while they are meant to be doing homework or studying for a test.
- *Disengagement.* Disengagement refers to thoughts and feelings of giving up, trying less each week, detachment from school and schoolwork, feelings of helplessness, and little or no involvement in class or school activities.

Assessing Students Using the Motivation and Engagement Scale

The Motivation and Engagement Scale (available via www.lifelongachievement.com) is used in schools (e.g., by teachers and counsellors) and by psychologists to assess students on each part of the Wheel. There is a primary school version (Motivation and Engagement Scale—Junior School) and a high school version (Motivation and Engagement Scale—High School). Students answer a set of questions for each part of the Wheel and receive a score that can be compared against Australian norms. It takes about 15 minutes to complete. There are 11 parts of the Wheel and students receive a score for each part. Students' scores can be used to provide educational assistance, information to teachers and parents, or to benchmark year groups or the entire school.

Gifted Students and the Motivation and Engagement Wheel

Based on results from the Motivation and Engagement Scale, we have come to understand how students are placed on the Wheel. Because gifted students are a diverse group of learners, it is not surprising that their motivation and engagement profile can differ greatly from one another. Students who are in flow and enjoying the journey are likely to be higher on most of the positive motivation and engagement factors. Students for whom the pressures of competition are high may reflect a profile with greater anxiety and fear of failure. They may also be low in their learning focus (because they are more focused on competition than on learning). Students who are perfectionistic may be high in valuing, planning and task management, but also higher in anxiety. Students who procrastinate tend to be high in self-sabotage.

Students' responses to the Motivation and Engagement Scale show clear gender differences. Boys (even gifted ones!) tend to be lower than girls in valuing, planning, task management, and persistence—and higher in self-sabotage and disengagement. Girls tend to be lower than boys in their sense of control and higher in anxiety.

Age differences are also apparent (even among gifted students), with students in primary school and senior high school being more motivated and engaged than students in the middle of high school (i.e., around 14–15 years of age).

The Wheel is thus a helpful way of understanding the many different types of gifted students and the parts of motivation and engagement that are most relevant to them.

Major Motivation and Engagement Challenges Facing Gifted Students

Many motivation and engagement challenges are relevant to all students. But some of these challenges are particularly salient for the gifted learner. Below I outline some of the main challenges as well as quick tips to deal with them. I explain more strategies in *How to Motivate Your Child for School and Beyond* (see the chapter on Gifted and Talented Students).

What “Being Smart” Means

Students' views of what “being smart” means can affect their motivation. It is not uncommon for gifted students to succeed without much effort, preparation, organisation, or study (particularly in primary school and the early years of high school). In itself, this is not a problem. The problem begins when students conclude that to be smart they need to do things easily and without effort, preparation, or organisation. This can lead to them avoiding academic challenges. It can also mean they do not get much practice at trying, studying, and preparing - which bites them in later high school.

Quick tip: Make clear to students that intelligence or “smartness” does not mean doing things without effort. All duxes and distinguished thinkers need to work hard to get where they do. Also, it is important to genuinely celebrate skill development and effort as much as or more than the child's marks or grades. This makes it clear to students that effort is valued.

The “Risks” of Effort

Following from the previous point, some students believe that trying hard means they are

not that smart. Some even become fearful of making an effort because of what they believe it says about their intelligence. This can reduce their willingness to try because trying may indicate a lack of intelligence. Again, over time, as they reduce or withhold their effort, they become less practised at trying, studying, and preparing. In the later years of high school this can have negative consequences.

Quick tip: If your child believes that trying harder means that they are not so smart, shift the focus towards the *quality* of their effort rather than the *quantity*. Another suggestion is to reduce the amount of praise given to the child for succeeding with little effort. Sure, we do need to acknowledge and celebrate successes, but it is best not to focus the praise on the fact that they succeeded with little effort.

Students' Views of Intelligence

Some gifted students have a fixed view of intelligence. With such a view, students believe they cannot improve or increase their intelligence. Even if they believe they are highly intelligent, a fixed view of it means that if improvement is needed, they do not see themselves as capable of improving. Thus, at critical times, these students tend to be less motivated and more inclined to give up.

Quick tip: Be very clear with children that school-related intelligence can be improved and developed. If we define school-related intelligence in terms of thinking strategies, critical thinking skills, analytical skills, study skills and so on, research shows that all these can be improved. This lays the groundwork for believing that school-related intelligence can be increased.

Low Sense of Control

Gifted students who underachieve often attribute the causes of their success to factors outside their control (such as good luck, an easy test, easy marking, or the teacher liking them). They can also attribute the causes of failure to their lack of ability. This way of thinking strips them of their sense of control. They do not feel much control over their ability to repeat previous successes because these successes were beyond their control (that is, due to luck, easy tests, easy marking, or the teacher liking them). They do not feel much control over their ability to avoid failure because their previous failures were because of a lack of ability and these students tend to have a fixed view of ability, which means they believe they cannot improve to avoid failure next time.

Quick tip: It is important to guide children's focus onto the controllable factors in their academic life. Some of the factors they control include:

- The amount of study or practice they do.
- The quality of their study.
- Time management.
- Preparation of schoolwork.
- Presentation of schoolwork.
- Organisation of their study environment.
- Prioritisation of schoolwork and deadlines.

Fear of Failure

Fear of failure is common among gifted students. Many of them think that their mistakes show that they lack intelligence. Many of these children also believe that their value and worth are dependent on high scholastic achievement. Failure not only negatively reflects on their academic skill set but also on their worth as a

person. When a child's worth is overly dependent on his/her capacity to achieve highly, fear of failure escalates.

Quick tip: Encourage your child to see mistakes and failure as diagnostic feedback to help them improve—not as diagnostic feedback on their intelligence. Courageous and constructive responses to mistakes represent the greatest opportunity for academic growth. It is also important for parents to separate a child's academic results from his/her worth as a person. They are not a fundamentally better person because they received a good grade; they are not any less of a person because they received a poor grade. When the heat is taken out of achievement in these ways, students do not live in fear of failure and making a mistake.

Fear of Success and the Imposter Syndrome

A fear of success can also get in the way. For some students, a high level of success means that the only way to go is down. For some students success can also make them feel different from friends or peers, and many students do not want to be different. Some students also worry that—by outperforming their friends—they could upset their friends or become unpopular in some way. A related phenomenon is the Imposter Syndrome: some students feel like a fraud every time they succeed—like an average student masquerading as a bright student. With every success, they are one step closer to being exposed.

Quick tip: At the heart of all these dynamics is low self-confidence. It takes confidence to live up to one's successes and the pressures and responsibilities success brings. Particularly for students low in self-confidence, the task often

begins with challenging their negative thinking. Some common negative thinking traps are:

- Not taking sufficient personal credit for success (e.g., passing it off as due to good luck, easy marking, the teacher liking them, the teaching assigning the wrong grade etc.).
- Focusing more on one's weaknesses than on one's strengths.
- Overestimating the likelihood of negative consequences (e.g., friends not liking them if they get a good result).
- Mistaking feelings for facts (e.g., believing that because they feel nervous or scared that means something bad will happen).

When students challenge these negative thought patterns, their self-confidence has a far better chance to flourish.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is common among gifted students. Because their ability to excel can be a large part of their identity or because their worth is so heavily based on their academic excellence, they feel at risk if they submit work that falls short of perfection. Also, because they can get so much praise and approval for doing well and perhaps perfecting some tasks, they come to believe that anything short of perfection risks a reduction in praise and approval.

Quick tip: Fear of failure often underpins perfectionism, and some advice was provided on this above. In addition to that advice is the possibility of lightheartedly challenging a child to try something new or innovative in the way they do an academic task or activity, and thus risk a mistake (from which they will learn). This is best attempted in a low-stakes task or activity (not,

for example, one's final year exam). Encouraging more balance in a child's life can also be helpful. Extra- and co-curricular activities can be healthy and constructive ways to redirect some energy and attention that was previously spent on perfecting a task.

Students' View of Competition

Some gifted students fear competition. This is because these students see competition in terms of "winners" and "losers" and fear that "losing" will reflect poorly on their identity (being "smart") and sense of worth. Many would rather not run the race at all than run the race if there is a risk of "losing" (or even coming second!).

Quick tip: Personal best (PB) goals can be helpful here. PB goals encourage the child to strive to outperform his/her own previous best effort or performance. A PB goal retains the energising properties of competition (because a child competes with himself/herself), but places the focus on the child's own journey. Our research has shown that this does not leave the child anxious and fearful of "losing". Examples of PB goals include:

- Spending more time on study tonight than last night.
- Doing better in the end-of-year exam than in the mid-year exam.
- Asking a teacher for help when typically the teacher is avoided.
- Reading more for an assignment than is usual.
- Getting more sums in mathematics correct in this quiz than the last quiz.
- Staying in one's seat longer today than yesterday.

Every child has a PB goal they can strive for. Indeed, even for the perfectionist, their PB may be to do a little less study than usual! In all cases, the child is his/her own benchmark and the adverse properties of competition are avoided or reduced. In Download Corner on the homepage of www.lifelongachievement.com are PB worksheets for students and PB teaching templates for teachers.

Conclusion

Motivation and engagement are ever-present in gifted students' academic development. The Motivation and Engagement Wheel helps parents and educators identify specific motivation and engagement areas of strength as well as areas that may require extra attention. Also, there are some common motivation and engagement challenges in these students' lives. Following on from these, there are clear benefits from reworking students' ideas of what it means to be "smart", positioning effort in a much more constructive way, reworking students' view of intelligence, addressing their fear of failure and fear of success, and focusing more on personal bests than excessive attention to external competition. Addressing some, most, or all of these, places the gifted child in a stronger position to achieve to his/her potential and to enjoy the journey along the way.

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Mensa is a not-for-profit society whose members qualify by having an IQ in the top 2% of the population. Mensa's goals include identifying and fostering human intelligence for the benefit of humanity, and encouraging research in the nature, characteristics, and uses of intelligence. The Australian Mensa Information Initiative draws on experts to answer 'frequently asked questions' in an accessible way. For more information, visit: mensa.org.au/giftedchildren.

Further Reading and Resources

Lifelong Achievement Group (2017). *Personal best worksheets*. PDFs downloaded from homepage www.lifelongachievement.com.

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