How to Motivate a Laid-Back Teenager

Individuality is Greater than You Think
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A caring father wanting to help his daughter asked,
I read the article that you linked to, and this paragraph definitely describes my daughter and I.

"Some hardworking parents try to motivate their laid-back adolescents by telling them how important it is to be an achiever. But laid-back adolescents aren't interested in success; if they were, they wouldn't be so comfortable with their laid-back lifestyle. Instead, they value leisure and work-life balance. If you push them too hard, they quit altogether."

So is it even possible to motivate a laid back teenager? If she wants leisure, which my daughter does, how do I find out what motivates her to work hard? I'm not imagining a constructive result by coming straight out and asking her, "Honey, what would motivate you to work harder in school?" I would most likely get a disinterested shrug.

She's not a bad kid. She has a few good friends, doesn't party, is respectful and compassionate. And I have talked, since my kids were very little, about college and career.

I can see what you are saying about motivating them with values that are important to me. I've been doing that, without it ever occurring to me that's what I was doing. But now, this is definitely making me think. My question is, is it even possible to motivate her, if this is something she just hasn't shown any interest in? We all want different things in life, but she may not really get yet that she'll get more of the things she wants in life by putting in the effort now. And my reminding her of this hasn't helped. Is it possible to motivate her to work harder at school? If so, how do I find out what motivates her?

The most common reason for a person of any age to be laid-back is what we call a "low" or "weak" desire for power. Psychologically, power is about the expression of "will." Everybody embraces this intrinsic motive, but individuals prioritize or value it differently. "Willful people" typically aim for a high expression of power, as compared to what is normative for our culture. They tend to be achievement oriented, assertive, and/or seek leadership roles, because these behavior all satisfy a high need for influence. "Non-directive" people typically aim for a low expression of power. They may be laid back, nonassertive, and seek roles as a helper or assistant, because these all satisfy a weak need for influence of will.

Most people fall between these willful and laid-back personalities types. They have an "average" need for power. Sometimes they act like achievers and leaders, but other times they act like followers or laid back. Sometimes they assert themselves, and sometimes they don't. It balances to an average experience of power.

Assuming your daughter really has a low need for power, and you have a significantly higher need, she intrinsically enjoys experiences you intrinsically dislike, and vice versa. This is a situation ripe for misunderstanding and misguided efforts to change each other.

People with a low need for power are likely to remain that way their entire lives. This is because she values being laid-back, that is, she wants to pursue leisure. Her pursuit of leisure is an intrinsic motive for her. She rarely or never experience hard work as a joy. In contrast, you may almost always experience it as a joy or prelude to achievement, which you value. Just as you think she is too laid back, she might think you work too hard.

Assuming she intrinsically values leisure, and dislikes strong expressions of will, the only way to motivate her to change is with a "greater motive," or need she values even more strongly. I am a very disorganized person, for example, but I organize my thinking, because intellectual life is a greater value for me than is spontaneity. Assuming your daughter in fact has a weak need for power, she will express a laid back attitude generally, but not necessarily in those few areas of life where she has a "greater motive" than low power.

Again, assuming she has a below average need for power, she should be willing to do some work, but only to a moderate degree. If you push her too hard she might quit and do no work at all. So you want to encourage her to prepare for her future in school and so on, but you need to be mindful not to overdo it. Remember, she can't like what you like, so for her expressions of will aren't usually enjoyable, and competence may not be high on her list of values.
You may be able to help her out significantly when it comes to her choosing a college major or career. She needs to choose something that fulfills her compassion and other needs. But she shouldn't choose anything that requires long hours, is focused on achievement, or requires influencing others. It should be something she has the talent to do easily. If she pursues a career path that requires long hours of preparation, she is likely to quit.

Knowing she has a low need for power also is helpful when it comes to selecting a life partner. If she were to marry an achiever, for example, they are likely to quarrel repeatedly over issues of work. She will complain that he is more interested in his work than in her, and he will complain she is lazy. The argument will recur over and over for as long as they are together. People with a low need for power are compatible with others who have a low need. The idea that a powerful or dominant personality matches to a submissive person is invalid; in such a situation, the dominant person humiliates the submissive. People need shared values to get along.

To find out how to encourage her now, you need to figure out what her interests are. They almost certainly fall under one or more of the 16 basic desires. You need to frame her working in terms of her intrinsic goals. If a high need for idealism motivates her compassion, for example, you could help her understand how preparing for her future might land her a career in social services, or a career helping animals, or whatever it is that interests her.

All this assumes that she in fact has a low need for power. Lack of effort in a school setting could be motivated by a low need for intellectual curiosity. These students dislike thinking for more than a few minutes at a time. They struggle with school but are fine afterwards. Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonalds Corp, bragged about being richer than his professor brother. He wasn't trying to put down his brother but to express his values. Kroc was a good example of someone who has a low need for curiosity but a high need for power. He liked to achieve but not to think.

You may be able to look at the 16 basic desires and more or less guess which ones are most applicable to your daughter. My book "Who am I" is inexpensive and can be downloaded from Kindle. It has a questionnaire appended. My book "Normal Personality" is a bit deeper but has much more detail about how the 16 basic desires are connected to traits and values.

The World Society of Motivation Scientists and Professionals (www.motivationscience.org) will be held in Washington D.C. in October. The first session is a series of papers about motivating students very much like your daughter.

Of course, the best way to proceed is with a professional. You daughter should take the Reiss School Motivation Profile (RSMP), which is a standardized assessment of 13 basic desires or intrinsic motives. The professional would need to interpret this in the context of other information on your daughter. The RSMP is a new tool and many school psychologists need to be trained to use it. They can purchase the tool from IDS Publishing Corp. and inquire about upcoming training events. For quality control, the standardized motivational tools i created are not available to the public directly. Only trained or licensed professionals can use them.

In my book "Who am I" in the chapter on family I talk about how it can be hard on parents when their children have values different or even opposite from their own. I don't know how much parents can determine who their children are, but whatever opportunity we may have, it is mostly gone by adolescence. We can love them for who they are, or we can fight with them forever to change to become who we want them to be. Some parents go to their grave writing wills to demand their children change for the inheritence. I think it is best to just accept them and help when the opportunity arises.