

## **Overcoming Difficulties with Procrastination, Motivation and Work Avoidance**

The home environment tends to have numerous distractions that can make it difficult to get work and study tasks done. Here are some strategies to help your family be productive at home:

- Create a work/school-like environment
  - Remove unnecessary distractions and clutter. e.g. TV, needy pets.
  - Make sure that all of the necessary materials are available, so that leaving the workspace is minimised.
- Structure the order of tasks to suit your or your child's needs/preferences. Some like to order the work from the hardest or least interesting to the most interesting/enjoyable, some may need to switch regularly from one or two non-preferred activities to a preferred activity, to ensure there are frequent rewards. You may like to give your child 2 options of how to complete a task, to give him/her a sense of control. You just need to ensure that both choices are acceptable to you and that not doing anything is off the table as an option.
- Make sure that what you need to do to complete a particular task is clear and if it is not, be proactive in seeking out the needed information from a teacher/colleague or resource before you dive in. Uncertainty about what to do, can lead to negative feelings about completing it, which makes procrastination or task avoidance a more attractive option.
- Positive reinforcement: Ideally, internal rewards (e.g. sense of pride) for a job well done, would be enough to motivate us to complete a task. However, just like adults work to get money, children may also require some "currency" to work effectively, particularly when they find a task difficult. Try relationship-based rewards first e.g. praise (specific and focused on effort not ability), positive body language (e.g. thumbs up) and shared activities, to help build the internal reward system and strengthen relationships. If your child needs a more visible system, common examples are stickers, stamps, ticking off a list, or earning time on a (solo) preferred activity. Try to avoid the promise to purchase

something if possible, as this can end up being quite expensive and actually demotivate in the long term. If this is the only thing that works, make sure that your child needs to put in significant effort to get the item. For example, you could print a picture of what they want, cut it up into pieces and give them a piece of the “puzzle” each day if/when their set tasks are complete. They would then be able to purchase their reward after all the pieces are collected.

- A note on praise: Teachers have studied praise in depth, and it is quite an art form. Here are some links to give you a brief overview of how to use it to motivate effectively and build a growth mindset:
  - <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/for-educators/classroom-management/the-power-of-effective-praise-a-guide-for-teachers>
  - <https://www.mindsetworks.com/parents/growth-mindset-parenting>
  - [http://www.araluenps.vic.edu.au/PDFs/handbooks/growth\\_mindset.pdf](http://www.araluenps.vic.edu.au/PDFs/handbooks/growth_mindset.pdf)
  - [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/video/series/parenting\\_videos](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/video/series/parenting_videos) (Lots of good parenting videos, including on praise, growth mindset)
- Negotiate and set a realistic timetable and expectations (both of you may be productive in a different way and at different times when you work from home). Remember that younger children need shorter work sessions and more frequent breaks than older children, due to a shorter attention span. One rule of thumb is 3-5 minutes per year of a child’s age e.g. a child of 5 years might be able to concentrate for 15 minutes (5 years x 3 minutes). Check with your child’s teacher if you are not sure what is realistic.
- Stay connected to workplace/school, to help to hold you both accountable for completing work, as well as providing much needed human connection.
- For those of us who tend to need peer support/pressure to get things done, a helpful strategy can be to make your goals and deadlines visible to others, particularly those who we want to impress e.g. our boss. This can be done via conversation, or via technology e.g. email, shared OneNote page. A follow up with the person/people, once the deadline

has been reached can increase the power of this technique, as well as give you the opportunity to get feedback and set new goals.

- Some people find work “sprints” to be effective to increase productivity and efficiency. To do this, you and/or your child identify a concrete goal to achieve and challenge yourself to achieve this goal in a set amount of time e.g. 20 minutes. Make sure that it is a SMART goal. i.e. Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound. A timer is then used to keep you on track and focused on goal achievement. The idea of work sprints can also be used to achieve things not school/work related and/or to create family challenges e.g. everyone tidies up their room in 15 minutes.
- Place barriers between you and your distractors to make it harder to engage in a preferred activity e.g. put the game console in a cupboard, unplug the TV at the wall.
- Set a timer if engaging in a preferred activity during a work/study break, to ensure that you don’t spend more time than planned. Devices, such as iPads also have screen time settings, to make it easier to limit a child’s use.
- As interruptions to work/study are inevitable, regardless of where you are working, you may find it helpful to have some if-then plans, to help manage interruptions (or procrastination triggers) efficiently. For example, if you are called by a friend/relative during a key work task, you may plan to ask if you can call them at a time later in the day.
- Finding and increasing the meaning in a task can help to motivate you to complete it. If working with your children, point out the importance of a task in real life to help make it more relevant and important to them. For example, learning about and following a healthy eating plan can help you to live longer and prevent many lifestyle diseases that will affect your quality of life.

- If you must procrastinate or avoid a task temporarily, try engaging in “good procrastination,” which is a task that is more important than the one you are avoiding. For example, you may choose to spend 20 minutes writing ideas for the book you really want to write, or start using that meditation app that you downloaded months ago, but haven’t opened.