

Scoring Goals

Helping children identify goals and the reasons for having them can motivate them into achieving in, and out of, school, says Márianna Csóti.

Every Child Matters has outcomes related to achieving: children should achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation, achieve stretching national educational standards at secondary school and achieve economic well-being following from a successful school career. Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) acknowledges the importance of motivation in children: they should be self-motivated, be effective and successful learners and be able to promote calm and optimistic states that promote the achievement of goals, recover from setbacks and persist in the face of difficulties. This article shows children how to set realistic goals, motivate them into achieving them – which can be especially difficult for children with special educational needs - and to adapt the goals when it is clear that the end goal is no longer realistic or desirable for them.

Goals

Discuss with the class what goals are: things to aim for or to focus on to give purpose in life. Explain different types of goals as outlined below and invite the children to give examples.

A mini goal is a one off, short-lived goal. For example, proactive children who want to go to a football or rugby match don't sit quietly at home hoping that someone will guess this and invite them to go but will take the initiative and ask someone to take them or to accompany them.

A short-term goal is something that will take from a few weeks to two or three years to achieve and involves repeated needs. An example is a child wanting to learn a martial art or how to Salsa.

A long-term goal could describe where a child wishes to be in five or ten years' time such as working as a carpenter and being married with children. This kind of goal involves a set

of steps, starting at one point and finishing at a very different point, encompassing many short-term goals with steps of their own such as getting whatever GCSEs the child can, being trained for carpentry and finding someone to marry.

What kinds of goals do the children currently have? Answers might include: getting qualifications that will take them on to further education or to training after leaving school; making and keeping friends; getting a boyfriend/girlfriend; learning a particular skill, and saving for a school trip or a new gadget.

Have any of them had a goal in mind and later adapted it or replaced it (rather than drop it altogether) to address changing needs or circumstances? Can they explain the original goal and the reasons for their modifications? A child, for example, learning to play the piano who lacks motivation to practise, even though he says he enjoys playing, could switch to learning the clarinet. By joining an instrumental group in or out of school he could experience the pleasure of making new sounds with other children and be motivated to practise to keep abreast of the work they are all undertaking. Having a portable

instrument could open up opportunities previously denied.

Using the past to inform the present

Ask the children to suggest things that they have achieved. The list might include:

- being chosen for a school sports team
- scoring the winning goal at a match
- improving their grades
- being top at something
- winning prizes
- progressing through music grades
- being able to cook or bake cakes
- developing home improvement or vehicle maintenance skills

Now ask the children to think of only one achievement – and say what they did to reach that goal. They might say:

- wanting to do well or be the best
- practising
- not allowing setbacks to deter them
- wanting the end goal more than anything else.

Did any children have at some time a firm goal in mind and fail to achieve it?

Why was this? They might say:

- the goal was unrealistic for them
- they lacked motivation or sticking power

- they weren't that bothered about the end goal in the first place
- they changed their minds part way through and decided to focus on something else instead
- they didn't believe in themselves
- they were too anxious or depressed to carry on with what was needed to achieve the end goal
- family circumstances made the goal too hard to achieve
- people kept saying they weren't good enough and they believed them
- poor health or a disability made the goal too hard to achieve.

Questions children could ask themselves when setting goals

- Is it a realistic goal, bearing in mind my personal resources and abilities without under or over estimating my capabilities?
- Is it a goal that I personally want rather than what anyone else wants for me or what my friends want?
- Is the goal at the right level? Not achieving goals that are too high for me, or very easily achieving goals that are too low, will damage my self-esteem.
- Does the goal move me forward in some way – rather than me playing safe by staying in a rut or allowing circumstances dictate where I end up?
- Have I thought about the steps I will need to take to reach the goal and put these in sequence?
- Have I broken large goals into several small goals?
- Do I concentrate on each step in turn and tick it off when I have reached that point to give me a sense of satisfaction – motivating me to carry on?
- Now that I am part way through my goal is it still achievable and what I truly want? If not, am I prepared to adjust my goal?

Making life action plans

A (*long-term*) *career plan* is to do with exams and qualifications leading to jobs and further progression. Ask secondary aged children to write a long term goal

plan which could, for example, be related to getting GCSEs and leaving to train for a vocational qualification at a nearby college.

What would the children do if they found that they were not enjoying the chosen course or subjects and/or were struggling academically with them post 16? Would they carry on nevertheless or would they change their plan? If they choose the former what might be the risks?

Suggestion: After years of re-takes or scraping through exams they might reach another academic hurdle that is too high for them to cross – having gone so far down this particular road they might find it much harder to change direction. Or they might become disillusioned about their future and lack the emotional strength to look for satisfaction elsewhere.

What benefits from changing course would the children experience if it looked like the original plan was not going to work for them? Suggestions: they actively take control of their life, they remain in touch with their needs and can assess their abilities realistically, they nurture their self-esteem by not forcing themselves into a line that does not suit them, they prove their adaptability – and they take care of their happiness by increasing their chances of doing something that they will enjoy.

Do ensure that children do not confuse a well considered decision to change course with flitting from one thing to another on the spur of the moment without ever giving any goal their best efforts. Children who back off before testing their strengths lose out and risk denying themselves the immense satisfaction of achievement or missing an area in life that would suit them admirably because they did not give it due attention.

Personal quality goals. Ask the children to make a list of personal qualities they admire and then pick the most important one they feel they don't have or of which they don't have enough. Then they should write an action plan including everything they can think of to help them reach their goal. Action plans can be shared to help others in the class with similar needs.

If, for example, the children don't feel they are getting the respect they deserve including not being given credit for their personal qualities they could do the following:

- Consider why people don't respect me by listening to, and remembering, what people say to me and about me

to help show me the changes I need to make.

- Without boasting, share my experiences to make other people aware of my strengths - such as being able to build model aircraft or complicated Lego designs or excelling at puzzles, art, music or football.
- Think about how I like to be treated and behave towards others in a similar way: I could make extra effort to be kind and thoughtful towards others.
- Save silliness for times of play and curb inappropriate behaviour at all other times – apologise if I do behave inappropriately.
- Watch people who are respected to learn the kinds of things of which other people approve. Then I should try to do similar things.

Being motivated

Self-motivation involves recognising personal incentives such as reaching the end of goals and enjoying the rewards that go with achieving those goals.

Without goals children will fail to be motivated as they won't see the point in making an effort. A good example of a

lack of motivation of this kind is found in Year 9 when children know that they will never study a particular subject again as they plan to drop it at the end of the year.

For motivation, the goal also has to be something that the children care about. Telling them that maths and English, for example, are vital subjects in the employed world when they intend to leave school at 16 with no plan or desire for further advancement might not drive them to work hard at these subjects. So how can children be helped to care more about ambivalent goals?

Persisting in the face of difficulties.
When challenged by difficulties in life children have to work out ways of surviving despite the problems they have. Although they will usually need help to do this, children could cultivate the qualities needed to persist in the face of difficulties. Ask the children what qualities these might be.

Suggestions include: Persistence, not giving up, believing in themselves and their abilities, stamina to keep going, the ability to seek help when needed, being able to adapt to changed circumstances, keeping focused on the end goal, having a healthy attitude and realistic rather

than pessimistic thoughts, and the courage to keep on despite adversity.

In the case of a dislike of maths and English children could be asked to imagine how hard it would be continuing a subject they dislike at school, college or evening class in addition to their chosen subjects or employment – so why not try as hard as they can now to lessen the likelihood of them having to spend another year or more with these subjects? They could picture what else they might be doing with their time and energy post 16.

Positive imaging. Ask the children to imagine what life would be like having achieved their end goal. They should project regularly an image of themselves in their mind having achieved what they want.

Overcome negative thoughts. Ask the children to identify any negative thoughts they have that block them from reaching their goal. Examples might be:

- ‘I’m embarrassed at how bad I am at xxx.’
- ‘If I say something, it’ll come out wrong and I’ll look stupid.’

- ‘I’ve never succeeded at anything, so I’m bound to fail.’

Working on false information like this will make their subconscious want to fail to prove them right: it is easier than moving forward. Ask the children to provide healthier thoughts to replace the unhealthy ones such as:

- ‘I have plenty of time to turn things around.’
- ‘I can admit to not knowing something without it defining me as stupid. It is the stupid person who doesn’t ask for an explanation, not wanting to learn.’
- ‘I’m more aware of my capabilities and have discovered why things went wrong before. I can guard against the same things happening again.’

By being aware of unhelpful attitudes and unreasonable expectations children are better placed to reach their personal potentials – and even stretch these boundaries a little – enabling them to lead broader and more fulfilling lives.

Writing a simple goal plan

Ask the children to write a goal plan for a thorough tidying and cleaning of their room.

The process of writing a goal plan for something that is already familiar to them can help them to write other plans in the future. Suggestions:

- Put all dirty clothes into the washing basket.
- Hang up all clean clothes.
- Remove any dirty mugs etc.
- Divide rubbish into waste and recyclables.
- Deal with tidying one surface at a time starting with the largest – the visible floor space, under the bed, desk, shelf, bedside table and window sill.
- If there is no room in cupboards or drawers to house stuff tidied away, tackle each one in turn for a clear out.
- Take out all rubbish bags.
- Change the bed.
- Dust the room and wash off any drink spills.
- Vacuum the floor.

Márianna Csóti is the author of, *Developing Children's Social, Emotional and Behavioural Skills* (Continuum £16.99) and *Take Charge of Your Future* (Right Way £5.99) from which this article has been adapted. Her website can be viewed at www.mariannacsoti.co.uk