Helping Children Want to Do Things: Identifying and Using Motivators

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In 2004 I gave a presentation in which I began by listing the ten things that bugged me most about special education. These included the fact that the world of special education often tends to be punitive and judgmental of children, with simplistic and clearly defined concepts of 'success' and 'failure' leading most assessment, planning, and teaching. I also complained that real individualization of assessment and teaching seems to be considered either impossible, or undesirable, almost as if it is cheating and giving the child an unfair advantage, or spoiling them. I referred to the heavy emphasis that is placed on the child acquiring discrete and measurable skills, usually in some pre-ordained standardized sequence, rather than there being a focus on the things that are truly important for any child's future life – positive self-image, self confidence, feelings of mastery, problem-solving strategies, sociability, sufficient receptive and expressive communication for their needs, and effective self regulation. I asked why, when there is any interest in individualizing the communication and language program for a child, the focus is almost exclusively on the mechanics of how to adapt and deliver language to the child rather than on any of the other important components of communication such as motivators, locus of control, the child's existing expressive behaviors, turn-taking, and positive social experiences. There also seems to be a widespread feeling that making education fun and pleasurable for a student of any age is a bad thing. In attempting to deal with all these widespread problems I often begin by trying to get people to consider the individual child's motivators as the very first step.

Why do motivators matter, and why are they important?

The idea that each child has their own needs and preferences, and their own enthusiasms, and that these should determine and guide our intervention if only we have the skills and the patience and the willingness to see and to understand them, fits in well with the 'follow the child' approach of influential educational theorists in our field like Jan van Dijk and Lilli Nielsen. For a long time in the field of deaf-blind education many other writers too have emphasized the important role of each individual's motivators in encouraging and promoting the acquisition, use, and development of skills. The fact that writers are continuing to push this philosophy (myself included) suggests that it is still not widely accepted or acted upon. McInnes and Treffry reminded us more than 25 years ago that every child with deaf-blindness might:

> '…be deprived of many of the most basic extrinsic motivations', and that every child also might '…be forced to develop unique learning styles to compensate for his or her sensory impairments' (McInnes & Treffry, 1982 p 2).

So it is important to spend time investigating what are the real motivators for each individual, since they

may be unusual and very individualized, and possibly things that we would not find motivating at all. As a part of this we should also be trying to discover the opposite – those things that are a big 'turn-off' for each child and only produce aversive responses. This is why the first step in making a Personal Passport for a child is focused on working out what they like and do not like, and how we can tell what they want or definitely do not want (Brown, 2004).

Think about van Dijk's emphasis on the importance of first 'following the child', finding a way of joining the child acceptably in what they are doing, even if it is considered to be an undesirable stereotypical self-stimulating behavior. In this way you may begin to build a positive relationship with the child which creates a strong possibility of successful assessment and teaching in the future. In their assessment approach Nelson and van Dijk tell us that:

> 'The foundation of the assessment is the establishment of a relationship with the child and the creation of a secure base that begins with the child's ***interests and successes***, and it is the responsibility of the assessor to adjust his/her emotions, cognitive level and communications to those of the child.' (Nelson, van Dijk 2001, pp4-5).

This emphasis on identifying and utilizing the child's motivators continues throughout the document:

> 'Pre-assessment planning begins by talking with the child's parents …to obtain information about the child's history, ***interests, preferences, motivators***…Information is gathered about the child's preferred learning channels…as well as what the child ***likes and dislikes***' (ibid, pp5-6).

> 'The child's ***interests*** guide the process; therefore, the assessment begins by following the child's interests and movements' (ibid, p6).

> 'It is our hope that by carefully following the lead and ***interests*** of children…educators will come to know and understand the children and how they learn, communicate, socialize, and solve problems.' (ibid, p25).

In a very recent publication, Charity Rowland and others remind us that when beginning an assessment:

> '…the child may not warm up to you quickly and it may be difficult to directly elicit communication. It is best to learn about **the competencies and interests** of children in the context of normal routines and environments…Adopting an authentic assessment approach means that we understand that **children's interests and preferences**…can influence their behaviors' (Rowland 2009, p8)

With a focus on children with the most profound disabilities, another writer, Robbie Blaha, has provided valuable perspectives to help us on the exciting journey of getting to know each other. The focus on motivators is illuminated by two quotes from her seminal article on assessment;

> 'We know that the human nervous system is capable of making associations between two events when the final event in the chain relates to ***basic survival or pleasure needs***.' (quoted in Blaha, 1996, p8).

> 'As the family and the other members of the educational team work together they become

more able to recognize and respect the skills and ***strong personal preferences*** that children with the most profound disabilities show us. All the children have ways of showing us ***what they want more of and what they would like to avoid***. It is our responsibility to develop the assessment expertise needed to be aware of those messages and to use them to build better learning environments for the child.' (ibid, p12).

What are motivators?

Motivators are what drive us to do particular things in particular ways at particular times and with particular priorities. Some are very urgent and we are driven to seek them because they are essential to our survival: air to breathe, postural stability, physical safety, food and drink, avoidance of pain. At the next level are the sensory needs that determine our 'sensory diet' (described below) – sensory inputs that we seek or avoid in order to keep ourselves alert but calm and functioning in an effective way. Our emotional states play a significant part in motivating us to do things – feelings of fear, guilt, excitement, boredom, and curiosity can all be effective at getting us into action to seek something or to avoid it. Then, on the most intensely personal level, there is the huge range of many different things that we individually find interesting and enjoyable and stimulating, which make our lives worth living and to which we devote a great deal of time and energy and effort – seeing friends, finding solitary space, mountaineering, stamp collecting, cooking, playing baseball, reading novels, home decorating, chewing gum, fishing, running, or whatever. We need to remember that, as well as being very individualized, motivators can be many different things: particular objects (for example, a yellow stick, a ceiling fan, a piece of aluminum foil), specific sensory inputs (e.g. bright light, being wrapped tightly in a blanket, certain smells or tastes, vibration), certain large movement patterns (e.g. swinging back and forth, being rolled side to side on a therapy ball, spinning), favorite activities (e.g. horse riding, massage, eating, horse riding), spending time in familiar places (e.g. the swimming pool, or the supermarket, or the sand pit), or being in specific postures (e.g. flat on the back, or hanging upside down over a bar).

At the most basic sensory level Jean Ayres, the originator of Sensory Integration Theory and Therapy, has given us the concept of 'sensory diet' – the idea that we all need varied but specific sensory inputs at different times for different reasons, the way that we also need nutritional inputs of food and drink. The idea helps us to see certain child behaviors as fulfilling essential sensory needs rather than condemning them as just being 'self-stimulating' or 'self-abusive' or 'avoidance' behaviors. Jan van Dijk taught us decades ago that the best way to begin to teach a child with persistent rocking behavior, for example, might be to join them in their rocking and even help to facilitate it to enhance and intensify the stimulation that the behavior provides for the child (rocking primarily stimulates the proprioceptive and vestibular senses). He was emphasizing the need to begin teaching by first forming a positive and supportive relationship with the child by joining them in what they like doing, but from Ayres' point of view the idea also facilitates better functioning for the child by giving them more of the very sensory inputs that they are so obviously seeking through the rocking behavior. Both van Dijk and Ayres believed that the child should be an active and communicating partner in these interactions, never the purely passive recipient of sensory stimulation, and the adult was to remain alert, attentive, and responsive to the child, and never become just the mindless hand that bounced the trampoline, or pushed the swing, or massaged the child.

Whose motivators are they?

We need to remember that motivators come from each individual and are specific to them. Motivators are usually multiple in each individual (even the most profoundly disabled children normally have more than one thing that motivates them), and any identified motivator for an individual may gain or lose importance depending on many different factors like time, place, accompanying people, energy and nutrition levels,

and health issues. I am often asked if there is a book or an article with a special list of motivators that people can use as the basis of their lessons, but this idea loses sight of the essential point of the exercise (Durand & Crimmins, 1992). Just imagine if you had a magazine that listed the ten most common adult motivators in the USA, you might find that none of them worked on me – Tweeting? (I don't know what it is) Watching a football game? (I would pay to avoid it) Dinner with Paris or Oprah or Donald? (ditto) A smart and expensive Italian suit? (I would never wear it). A glass of ice-cold Coke? (Yuck! But try me with a single malt whisky or a cup of milky tea). In many cases only meticulously close observation of a child over time will give us the insights that we need to understand what turns them on. And always remember, a child's motivators are not necessarily the same as the things which they do that we like or that we approve of.

How might you use a child's motivators?

1. In the most simple and obvious way, even before the child reaches a level of cause and effect understanding, we might periodically use a motivating activity during a session to reinforce what the child is doing or to encourage them to continue. For example, high-fiving each other, or both standing and jumping and cheering, or simply squeezing the child's hand to give deep pressure. On another level, an identified motivator might be used as the reward for completing an otherwise unrelated activity, assuming, of course, that the child can understand or learn the direct connection between the task and the subsequent reward. An example of this is when the child gets time on their favorite swing if they finish their table wiping and chair stacking chore.

2. As an obvious extension of this idea, we might decide to alternate less attractive activities with highly motivating ones in the schedule to assist the child in becoming more focused and compliant throughout the day. This may be an especially effective strategy once the child has some kind of daily calendar or schedule that uses word cards or picture symbols or symbolic objects, as appropriate, to indicate the sequence of the upcoming activities (Blaha, 2002). We have all heard tales of children who spontaneously move the symbol that represents a motivating activity into an earlier place in the calendar sequence in the hope that they will then not have to wait so long and work so hard before they can enjoy themselves!

3. In a more creative way, the motivator might provide the entire framework for activities that present new challenges to the child and so teach new skills or new problem-solving strategies. David Wiley, in his brief but potent article 'Where Is There Joy in This IEP?', gives some examples of this (Wiley 2004. p3). So, for example, a child's intense fascination (some might call it an obsession) with ceiling fans might offer an obvious focus for practically any curriculum area that is appropriate, including:

   + **literacy and computer/Internet skills:** finding fan manufacturers and ordering their catalogs

   + **fine motor and hand-eye coordination:** cutting out pictures of fans and making a scrapbook

   + **math:** arranging the pictures of the fans in order of increasing weight, or price, or length of the blades, or in the order of date that each model was first manufactured

   + **matching and sorting:** by date, weight, color, or other features

   + **orientation and mobility and community experience:** searching out fans in the local area, identifying them, counting them, identifying the most common, and so on

+ **drawing or marker manipulation:** making new pictures of fans

+ **photography:** taking photographs of different kinds of ceiling fan which might then be used in many of the activities mentioned above.

4. To refer to Jean Ayres again, we might like to observe the student to see the impact of specific motivators on their arousal levels, attention span, and sensory functioning. A motivator that gets a student very over-excited (perhaps walking the hallways, trampolining, playing with water or a vibrating toy) might be best reserved for special occasions rather than indulged just before lunch or just before school ends. Observation to discover which favorite things calm and which excite the child could then help us to promote effective attention and learning through more appropriate levels of arousal.

Of course the identification and use of a child's motivators is only a part of the challenge that successful teaching presents to us. Many other considerations will always need to be dealt with – such as the pacing and sequencing of activities, physical supports and positioning, adaptations and modifications to activities and materials and environments, balancing variety and familiarity throughout the day, and balancing the child's needs with your own needs, and the family's, and the school's, and the school district's! But there is a very good reason why I *always* begin any assessment by finding a way to discover what the child likes, what they want, and what they do (Brown, 2001). Each child's motivators are a wonderful free gift that they offer to us, and to ignore or work against them virtually guarantees frustration and failure.

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