Goal Setting and Hope: Helping Children See the Possible

Hope isn’t just passively wishing and waiting for something to happen. Hope leads to the drive to set and pursue goals, take risks, and initiate action. Hope fuels problem-solving and helps children develop personal strengths and social resources. Research shows that high-hope people are excited about the future and set goals for themselves. Fishful Thinking gives parents tools to teach their children how to set positive goals, develop a system of appropriate rewards, and promote strategies of thinking that will enable children to go after whatever they want out of life.

Helping children set goals and work toward them effectively is an important aspect of hope and is critical to achievement in school and life. Setting goals that are unrealistic; do not match one’s talents, skills, and strengths; and/or are not accompanied by a plan to achieve those goals leads to frustration and disengagement. Luckily, adults can teach children specific strategies for setting goals that are realistic and achievable.

TYPES OF GOALS

There are many different kinds of goals that generally fall into three categories: achievement goals, process goals, and strength goals.

Achievement goals regard something we’d like to attain: getting a higher grade on a test, making the soccer team, or eating less junk food. Process goals regard the method and manner in which we’d like to do whatever it is we are doing: studying persistently for 20 minutes, thanking people politely, waiting patiently for one’s turn. Process goals focus on the how (studying persistently), rather than the outcome (getting an A). Strength goals are goals we set for ourselves that highlight character assets that we’d like to develop more fully: Feeling more confident when speaking in class, being kind to one’s sister, and being more grateful for the good things in one’s life are examples of strength goals.

STEPS FOR SETTING AND REACHING GOALS

There are many different approaches to goal-setting. Most approaches, however, highlight the following steps as critical to success.

Learn from past successes and failures. Help children identify when they achieved a goal and how, as well as times they did not succeed and why. Questions to consider include: How important was the goal to the things they value in life? Was the goal realistic and did it match their strengths? What were the steps for getting there and did they work? What obstacles did they face and how did they get around them (or not)? How did they feel when they reached their goal (or did not)?
Set specific and measurable goals. When goals are vague, you are destined to fall short of achieving them. Work with your child to set a goal that is specific and measurable. Specific goals are clear and help your child to know exactly what he or she wants to improve or do differently. Measurable goals are critical because they enable your child to evaluate how he or she is doing—and to change behaviors as necessary. “Do better in school” is vague. “Turn in my history paper by Friday” is specific and measurable. “Be nicer” is vague. “Say three kind things to my sister each day” is specific and measurable. As the parent, it is important that you help your child craft the goal so that it is specific and can be measured. Many children have a hard time doing this (at least initially). You can help turn a vague goal into a specific and measurable goal by asking questions that begin to narrow and define an objective and the resources necessary to achieve it. Once your child has a specific and measurable goal, write it down. You’ll want to help her to develop the plan for reaching her goal, and the best way to do this is to put it on paper.

Set Goldilocks goals (not too hard, not too easy, but just right). It is important to set goals that are realistic and attainable—but not too easy. Goals that are too hard can undercut motivation, and goals that are too easy can do the same. You want to help your child set a goal that makes him stretch—and that with some stretching your child can grasp the prize. Sometimes children set goals that are unrealistically high because they feel pressure from their parents, peers, and even the media. Alternatively, they might set goals that are too low because they lack self-confidence and optimism, and worry about how their parents or friends will respond if they fail to achieve the goal. Talk with your child about any pressures he feels from others and any fears he has about his own abilities. Help your child to set a goal that is slightly beyond his immediate grasp, but not so far above his current skills and abilities that he believes he has no chance of succeeding. Here again, asking a few simple questions can help your child assess goals that are both challenging and realistic.

Make a step-by-step plan. After you’ve made a specific, measurable, and realistic goal, you are ready to work with your child to map out the steps he or she will take to reach the goal. When listing the steps, it is important to consider the specific actions your child will need to take in order to reach the goal. Just like the goal itself, if the steps are vague, it will become much too easy for your child to get sidetracked. Help your child identify first steps, what resources he will need, who he might need help from, and a timeline. The objective is to help your child think through the various components of the goal and to end up with a list of specific steps that he can begin to take.

Build in appropriate rewards. A key part of reaching goals is staying encouraged throughout the process. Building in appropriate rewards as your child works through each step is an important motivator. Rewards for completing a step will be more effective in maintaining motivation than punishments for not reaching a step. This does not mean rewarding every step with something big or expensive. Ideally, the rewards will be intrinsic—a sense of pride and accomplishment when a step is completed. Realistically, such fundamental motivation will not always work. Each child is different and will require various amounts and types of rewards. Talk openly with your child about how she will keep herself motivated, and to identify reasonable rewards to both acknowledge the successes along the way as well as to maintain enthusiasm for the process. Some children will only need rewards after completing a few steps; others might need rewards after carrying out each step. Ideas include throwing around the football with a parent, baking cookies (and eating a couple), playing a video game for 15 minutes, riding bikes, earning points towards a toy, picking the restaurant for dinner, picking the movie to rent, getting half an hour of private time with mom or dad, and getting to stay up an extra half hour on the weekend.

Anticipate obstacles and plan “walkarounds.” It would nice if achieving one’s goals only required that they were specific and that we took the time to map out the steps. Then, all we would have to do is to
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follow the plan and succeed. Unfortunately, life rarely works that simply. There almost always obstacles of some kind. Identifying potential obstacles and planning “walk-arounds”—ways to walk around those obstructions—is necessary to achieving a goal. Sit down with your child and talk about the obstacles that he may encounter. Obstacles can be real-world (I have two other reports due this week), emotional (I feel too overwhelmed), mental (I don’t think I can pull it off), and physical (I’m tired), among others. The walk-arounds are the strategies, skills, and strengths your child will use to get past the barrier and continue with the steps toward the goal.

First, let your child identify the obstacles, and then guide him in designing the walk-arounds. Then, point out any obstacles that your child didn’t anticipate. Ask your child directly how you can be of help to him in reaching his goal. Parental support is important, and giving support in a way that feels supportive to your child is critical. There is no single way to support your child as he works toward a goal—what matters most is that you do your best to offer your encouragement and guidance in a manner that works for him.

Talk about it! The last step in goal-setting is to talk together about the experience of meeting or not meeting the goal. If your child did not reach her goal, be open about it. Ask her to share her feelings, and rather than trying to cheer her up, give her the opportunity to be upset without feeling pressured to “get over it” or “look on the bright side.” When the time feels right, help your child to evaluate what she did well in her quest to reach the goal, and how she can build on that next time. It’s also important to take an honest look at what didn’t work well and to help your child to derive their “lessons learned.”

When your child successfully meets her goal, help her to acknowledge her success. Ask how she feels, tell her how you feel seeing her meet her goal, encourage her to take ownership of it and to celebrate her achievement. You can help your child build on her success by exploring with her what skills, strengths, and strategies worked best, and to think about how she can use them more in the future. All too often we rush by our successes and don’t spend time with our children (and in our own life) thinking about and savoring our successes. To counteract this tendency, ask your child to describe the two or three most important lessons she learned about herself through the process of reaching the goal, and share with your child what you noticed, too.

Finally, you can help your children by sharing with them your own successes and failures in attaining goals. When you talk about your experiences, your children will learn helpful strategies, but even more importantly, you are teaching them that goal-setting is a life skill from which we all benefit.

For more activities to help develop goal-setting skills in your children, visit www.fishfulthinking.com and National Association of School Psychologists at www.nasponline.org.

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