

Fostering Intrinsic Motivation in Children: A Humanistic Counseling Process

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Abstract:

Humanistic counselors working with children seek to help them grow and develop the motivation needed to make decisions and changes in their lives. Intrinsic motivation, an important component of humanistic counseling, is defined and explicated, research is reviewed, and suggestions are made for counselors who seek to foster intrinsic motivation in children.

Article:

An overarching goal of humanistic counseling is to assist people in their growth process so that they can better cope with current and future problems (Rogers, 1977). Within a humanistic framework, counseling is oriented toward helping people grow and develop the motivation needed to make decisions and changes in their lives, thereby becoming less dependent on others.

One important distinction in motivation is the difference between being intrinsically and being extrinsically motivated. In the scholarly literature, intrinsic motivation has been defined as the desire to engage in an activity purely for the sake of participating in and completing a task (Bates, 1979; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). In contrast, extrinsically motivated behavior is any behavior that is motivated by external forces, such as the receiving of a tangible reward or the pleasing of another person.

The intrinsic motivation to meet academic, social, and psychological demands is an important predictor of children maximizing and reaching their potential (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1996). Intrinsic motivation is inversely related to anxiety (Gottfried, 1990) and depression (Boggiano & Barrett, 1992).

While intrinsic motivation has been discussed extensively in the fields of experimental psychology and educational research, it has received less attention in the counseling literature (Cameron, Banko, & Pierce, 2001). The purpose of this article is to review current theory and research on intrinsic motivation and to discuss specific ways in which humanistic counselors may foster intrinsic motivation in children.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

The overjustification theory dominates the intrinsic motivation literature and has received the most empirical attention (Aronson, 1966; Hennessey, Amabile, & Martinage, 1989; Lepper, Green, & Nisbett, 1973). According to the overjustification theory, providing external rewards (e.g., tangible rewards or verbal praise) for behaviors undermines and decreases intrinsic motivation for these behaviors. Some researchers maintain that extrinsic rewards do not undermine intrinsic motivation (McGinnis, Friman, CarIyon, 1999); however, many researchers have found evidence to support the overjustification theory (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999b; Dev, 1998; Edwards, 1994; Fair & Silvestri, 1992; Kohn, 1993; Lepper et al., 1973). Developmental issues in conjunction with motivation also have been considered (Gottfried, 1990). Most notably, researchers using meta-analytic techniques have found that the detrimental effect of tangible rewards tends to be stronger for elementary- age children than for college students (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999a) and that older children, in general, are less intrinsically motivated than younger children (Harter, 1981; Lepper, Sethi, Daldin, & Drake, 1997).

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AS A HUMANISTIC CONCEPT

Although grounded in operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953) and social learning (Bandura, 1969) theory and research, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are constructs that also are firmly rooted in humanistic traditions. Intrinsic motivation comes from internal mechanisms rather than external forces. Fundamentally, this means an intrinsically motivated person acts out of an internalized desire to self-actualize (Maslow, 1954, 1968). Conversely, people who act to achieve tangible rewards or to please others likely experience incongruence between their internal motivations and their actions, that is, a disparity between their real self and what is shown to the world (Rogers, 1951).

A common example of a switch from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation occurs for many children as they transition from the preschool to the early school years. From birth, children are naturally curious and inquisitive and explore their environment to gain new knowledge. As they develop language skills, children naturally begin to inundate adults and older children with questions in an intrinsically motivated attempt to gain new knowledge. What psychological factors, then, influence the continued development of intrinsic motivation in children in later years?

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS INVOLVED IN INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Researchers consistently have addressed four psychological constructs that appear to influence intrinsic motivation. These constructs are self-determination, self-perceived competence, relatedness, and perceived salience. Self-determination involves a basic, innate propensity that leads people to engage in interesting behaviors out of choice and their own needs rather than obligation or coercion (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Competence is defined as the need to be effective (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Relatedness is the need for warmth from and involvement with others (Deci & Chadler, 1986). Finally, perceived salience is the extent to which the child understands the importance of behaviors that are being externally rewarded and the effect this understanding has on motivation (Deci et al., 1999b).

Self-Determination

Researchers have considered the role that self-determination plays in influencing a child's motivation. Cordova and Lepper (1996) looked at the variables of contextualization, personalization, and choice. They demonstrated that when elementary school students were presented with material in a meaningful way, in a personalized form, and were offered choices concerning aspects of the learning context, they were more likely to be self-determined in the learning process. In another study on choice involving an anagram task, children were more likely to pursue the activity when they were given a choice of the puzzle (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), again demonstrating the importance of self-determination.

Self-Perceived Competence

Researchers also have considered the influence of specific types of verbal feedback on competence in children. Commonly, researchers have considered the impact of praise on children's behavior and the differential influence of praising the child's effort (e.g., "You're working very hard on that drawing") versus the child's ability ("You're really good at drawing") versus praising the outcome or product ("What a beautiful drawing"). Results of these studies are mixed and portray a complex and as yet not fully understood portrait of the influence of various types of verbal feedback. For example, Mueller and Dweck (1998) found that fifth graders who were praised for their intelligence (i.e., ability) were less likely to display task persistence after a failure when compared with children who were praised for working hard (i.e., effort). Other researchers, however, have found that this may differ on the basis of the child's gender. Koestner, Zuckerman, and Koestner (1989) found that boys demonstrated greater intrinsic motivation with ability praise and girls demonstrated more intrinsic motivation following effort praise in a task involving hidden figure puzzles.

In addition to the potential for gender differences, developmental level may be an important consideration. Substantial evidence indicates that intrinsic motivation orientation tends to decrease between third and ninth grade (Harter, 1981; Lepper et al., 1997) and that older children (eighth grade) are less likely than younger children (fourth grade) to be motivated by praise (Miller & Horn, 1997).

Researchers also have found that providing external reward for participation (i.e., "showing up") may decrease the quality of their work (Kohn, 1993; Lepper et al., 1973). For example, Lepper et al. (1973) found that children who expected to receive a tangible reward for drawing a picture drew pictures of a lower quality than those drawn by children who did not expect to receive a reward for drawing. The combination of blind reviewers and random assignment to groups used in the experiment led to the conclusion that providing external rewards for a behavior that is inherently rewarding (participants were initially chosen based on their interest in drawing) may undermine not only interest in the task but also the quality of work. Others, however, contend that this finding occurs because rewarding minimal performance trivializes the task, thereby reducing intrinsic motivation (Eisenberger, Pierce, & Cameron, 1999). Eisenberger and Armeli (1997) argued that rewards that specify high task performance convey the significance of the task and result in increased intrinsic motivation. Finally, researchers studying intrinsic motivation among Chinese students found that a combination of praising effort and ability has the greatest benefit on intrinsic motivation (Hau & Salili, 1996).

Attention in the scholarly literature also is given to verbal praise of a child's product or outcome (e.g., "What a beautiful drawing"). The primary argument against this type of response is that it potentially influences children to be more motivated to please others and to seek external reinforcement and evaluation (e.g., "Do you like my drawing?") rather than to participate in the activity of drawing simply for the innate pleasure (Landreth, 1991; Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Relatedness

Researchers also have looked at the child's school environment, home environment, and relationships with her or his parents. Matthews (1991) compared eighth-grade students involved in a nontraditional (nongraded self-selection) school and eighth-grade students in a traditional school. The results demonstrated that students in a relaxed atmosphere with small classes, input in decision making, and a role in the general functioning of the school had higher intrinsic motivation in reading, social studies, and science than students in a more structured environment. A longitudinal study found that children in a home environment that emphasized learning opportunities and activities were more academically intrinsically motivated than other children (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1998). Parental encouragement in response to grades also appears to be associated with a stronger intrinsic orientation. In contrast, high parental surveillance of homework, and parental reactions to grades that included negative control, uninvolved, or use of extrinsic rewards, predicted an extrinsic motivational orientation and lower academic performance (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993).

Perceived Salience

Researchers (Deci et al., 1999a, 1999b; Oldfather, West, White, & Wilmarth, 1999) have considered whether it is possible to increase a child's intrinsic motivation for behaviors that are being externally reinforced (e.g., by money, grades, or other incentives) by providing verbal information about the importance of the behavior. The hypothesis behind this is that a child will be more motivated to act on something if the child believes that it is important to do. Research findings generally support the hypothesis that such information does in fact increase the intrinsic motivation levels of children (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Dev, 1998; Hennessey et al., 1989).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although ongoing research is needed to further clarify the dynamics that influence children's intrinsic motivation, the available research does provide some direction for counselors working with children and adolescents. Because intervention strategies differ by age and developmental level, a distinction is made here between implications for talking and nontalking approaches. By talking approaches, we are primarily referring to the client-centered approach to counseling (i.e., Rogers, 1951). For nontalking approaches, we are primarily referring to child-centered play therapy approaches (i.e., DelPo & Frick, 1988; Landreth, 1991, 1993). In child-centered play therapy, the child is free to talk during the session but is not required to do so. The counselor, however, does verbally respond to the child's actions, expressed feelings, and verbal statements.

One caveat may be necessary here. Unfortunately, many adults respond to children in ways that foster an extrinsic orientation (e.g., lecturing, overuse of praise). In responding to a child in a way that positively influences her or his intrinsic motivation, it is important to consider that counselors may be responding to the child in ways that he or she is not accustomed and that may not be comfortable for the child, at least not initially. For example, a child who is accustomed to seeking and receiving external evaluations of her or his work (e.g., "Do you like my drawing?") likely will be frustrated initially by responses that do not evaluate the work. In these cases, many children work even harder to get the external reinforcement. Only through consistent and persistent refusal to provide such an external evaluation may the counselor influence the intrinsic orientation of the child.

Talking Approaches

We recommend the following talking approaches:

1. Based on the concept of self-determination, allow a child to make as many decisions as possible for herself or himself. Decisions that may appear to be minor, such as where to sit or what to talk about first, may be important in affirming the child's right to self-determine and influence intrinsic motivation. Conversely, approaches that are more directive (or to a greater extreme, coercive or punitive) undermine the child's right to self-determine and create an externally influenced environment.
2. To influence a child's self-perceived competence, it is important to use verbal praise with great intentionality. Although researchers have found mixed results, it appears that verbal praise of ability or outcome should be used sparingly and should be integrated with reinforcement of effort. For example, a response of, "This is a difficult task and you are working very hard at it" may do more to influence the intrinsic motivation of a child than a response of "You're doing a wonderful job"; the latter response also has the potential to be perceived by the child as insincere and may have deleterious results. The child may believe that he or she will only be appreciated if doing something "wonderfully." Such a belief system may create a fear of failure and an unwillingness to engage in tasks that are perceived as difficult (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Similarly, counselors can help children attribute task outcomes to effort and strategy rather than luck or other people (Dev, 1998). Responses to the outcome of a task such as, "you chose to finish that task," reinforce the intrinsic motivation of the child.
3. Because relatedness seems to be a key predictor of intrinsic motivation, it is important for the counselor to take time to establish a nurturing and empathic relationship with the child. It is important to establish this relationship at the child's pace, which demonstrates respect for the child's boundaries, develops trust, and affirms the child's right to self-determine. Similarly, serving as a consultant to parents and teachers on how to create such an environment in the home may influence the child's intrinsic motivation and increase academic success (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993; Gottfried et al., 1998).
4. Because perceived salience (i.e., a child's understanding of the importance of a task or particular behavior) has been shown to be important (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Dev, 1998; Hennessey et al., 1989), it may be worthwhile to explain the counseling process to the child and to his or her parents. For example, one of the authors (W. K. Schweiger) of this article had been counseling a 10-year-old child. After a few sessions, the counselor discovered that a parent was "rewarding" attendance at counseling with a trip to a fast-food restaurant afterward. Such extrinsic rewards tend to undermine the importance of the counseling process and promote a lackluster investment in the process; this was certainly true in this case. Counselors can make statements to parents like, "We both need to emphasize to your child that counseling is important. This process works better when parents trust in and are supportive of counseling."

Nontalking Approaches

We recommend the following nontalking approaches:

1. Based on the concept of self-determination, allow the child to initially choose, for example, what toys to play with in the play session or what to draw in an art session. This facilitates the child's intrinsic motivation for the activity and may result in more meaningful outcomes. Furthermore, if using a nondirective play approach, responding to a child's question of "What is this?" when eyeing a toy or object in the room, with "In here, that can be whatever you want it to be" rather than "That is a clown" facilitates a child's symbolic expression through play (Landreth, 1991) and an intrinsic orientation to the play process.

2. To increase relatedness, the counselor working with children in nontalking approaches should consider every strategy and response in the context of how it will foster the developing relationship with the child. Responses that facilitate the child's continued expression through play or art also serve to nurture the relationship. Such responses communicate, "I am here to learn from you." Conversely, interpretative responses or responses that seek to educate the child are often disadvantageous. These types of responses communicate, "I am here to show you how much I know and can teach you."
3. Nontalking approaches to counseling inherently convey the salience (i.e., importance) of the counseling process to the child during the session. The counselor pays considerable close, nonjudgmental attention to the child. This allows the child to understand that her or his actions, thoughts, and feelings are important. Counselors can also bolster the already present perceived salience of the child in the counseling process with statements such as "What you are doing here today is very important."

CONCLUSIONS

Counselors can use a variety of talking and nontalking approaches to counseling to foster intrinsic motivation in children. Specifically, counselors can focus on the four underlying constructs of intrinsic motivation—self-determination, self-perceived competence, relatedness, and perceived salience—when counseling children.

Although it is imperative for researchers to continue efforts to understand factors that facilitate and impede a child's intrinsic motivation, it is clear that the intentional efforts and strategies of counselors are important. Through intentionally and systematically responding to a child in a way that fosters and influences intrinsic motivation, a counselor helps the child optimize potential and honors the child's self.

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