

DISENGAGEMENT AND APATHY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Check to see if the student is getting the proper amounts of sleep and nutrition.

Check the possibility of the student using drugs or alcohol.

Check the possibility of an underlying family problem that may be negatively affecting the child's performance.

Inform the parents of the problem and enlist their support to determine possible causes and solutions. Provide the parents with weekly status reports so that they may reinforce positive school behaviors at home.

Investigate whether the material the student is learning is too hard, too easy, or time on task is too long or short.

Give the student one-on-one attention when possible to foster a caring environment.

Call on the student when you know he/she will answer correctly.

Foster an atmosphere of cooperation in your classroom. Avoid competition.

Never criticize when correcting students. Provide redirection in an objective manner, away from other students.

Find out what the student's interests are, and incorporate them into lesson lectures, examples, etc.

Give positive feedback whenever the student shows an interest in school.

Allow the student to be part of the decision-making process in defining types of assignments and classroom activities.

Make lessons interactive and interesting.

Allow former students in the community the opportunity to come and talk about their professions and how school was important in attaining their goals.

Talk with the student about his/her behavior. Give specific examples of behavior that needs improvement. Provide the student with alternative positive classroom behaviors.

Give the student leadership jobs in the classroom that are highly preferred by all students.

Provide as many academic successes as possible.

A contracting approach is often helpful for those students who have difficulty completing assignments. Encourage charting and graphing of his or her progress. Allow “free time” or similar rewards for the completion of assignments or for the attainment of a predetermined goal written in the contract (for example, fifteen minutes of free time for completing a specific number of assignments in the amount of time allowed or with a certain degree of accuracy.) Be specific regarding the expectations and rewards. Please see the school psychologist for assistance in implementing a contract.

Offer choices. In most areas (e.g., content, instructional processes, evaluation, discipline), giving students choices can have a major impact on their commitment to invest energy into learning activities. For example, allowing students choices in the way they demonstrate their understanding has the potential to greatly reduce students’ anxieties and obsession about grades.

Use student-led learning activities in class. Vary instructional methods – some lecture, some cooperative learning groups, some individual seat-work, some peer teaching, some student presentations, some demonstrations, and some reciprocal teaching in groups makes for stimulating learning.

Adapt academic tasks to students’ interests. For example, a math assignment might require students to survey their peers to find out what percentage of them enjoys rap, rhythm and blues, reggae, rock, jazz, country, classical, gospel, or new age music.

Find ways to connect the curriculum with the world outside of the classroom. Learning is often more relevant when one can see how knowledge or a skill is related to the “real world.”

Use humor, examples, analogies, stories, and questions to facilitate the active participation of the student in lectures and demonstrations.

Whenever possible, make student reaction and involvement an essential part of the learning process.

Avoid judgmental and evaluative behavior that puts the student on guard and inhibits his/her reactions.

Make the first experience with the subject matter as positive as possible.

If the student’s apathy is reported to be extreme, it may be appropriate to consider having the child evaluated for depression. Clues that a child might be depressed include: irritability, loss of emotional control, decreased interest or pleasure in nearly all activities, “I don’t care” attitude about most things, decrease in appetite and loss of interest in eating (not caused by medication), fatigue and insufficient energy for normal activities, feelings of worthlessness and talk of escape by running away or suicide, marked indecisiveness and inability to concentrate or think, frequent sobbing or crying.

Additional Resources:

Morrone, A. & Pintrich, P. (1997). Achievement motivation. In G.G. Bear & K.M. Minke, Children's needs II: Development, problems, and alternatives. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Supportive frameworks for youth engagement. (2001). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Wiseman, D. (2001). *Best practices in motivation and management in the classroom*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

www.education.nsula.edu/lmsa/using.htm: Using Behavior Modification to Combat Apathy.

www.reml.org/local_voices/summer2000/education/apathy.htm: Opinion: How Schools Can Reduce Apathy.

Contributors:

Pat Daly

Matt Dailey