

Motivation for Teens with ADHD: How It Crumbles and Why

Motivation for teens with ADHD shares an inverse relationship with criticism, executive function challenges, anxiety, and academic demands. As these increase, motivation decreases. Here are the reasons teens with ADHD cite for giving up or checking out, and ideas for caregivers who want to help.

"I don't care."

"It's pointless."

"Why bother?"

When motivation wanes (or outright vanishes) in [teens with ADHD](#), it happens for many reasons. Sometimes, years of criticism and corrections simply break the camel's back. Often, the [executive function demands](#) of middle or high school exceed a child's skill set. And clearly the onset of puberty — with its heightened moodiness, pre-menstrual symptoms, and social distractions — impacts nearly

everyone.

Regardless of its trigger, [depleted motivation](#) tends to look and sound quite similar across teens with ADHD. In a recent ADDitude poll, we asked nearly 1,000 caregivers, **“When your teen opts out of schoolwork or activities, which of the following are they most likely to say is the reason?”**

Here are the answers they gave:

- I forgot: 20.31%
- I’m too tired: 14.03%
- The teacher never told us about it: 11.56%
- It’s too hard: 11.52%
- I didn’t understand what the teacher wanted: 11.37%
- I ran out of time; I’m too busy: 10.54%
- What’s the point? I’ll never use this in life: 9.7%
- I’ll work harder/do better on the next one: 6.54%
- I’m already doing badly in this class: 4.32%

Comments and questions from survey respondents suggest that ADHD contributes to motivation problems in a few key areas:

Motivation Hurdle #1: ADHD Craving for Novelty

“Mine always says the schoolwork is too boring... what can I do about that response?”

"Our child won't do the work if it's too hard or too easy. Rewards or threats of taking away things don't move the needle of motivation. Nothing works."

Motivation Hurdle #2: Far-Off Rewards Don't Work

"I find that consequences of taking things away have no effect on my teen (16 years old), and it will often cause him to get into a negative, cascading emotional state. It seems better to allow him to still do something he hasn't earned while he's fighting the battle to find the internal motivation to do what he needs to do."

Motivation Hurdle #3: The 'Why' Is Missing from Schoolwork

"I actually agree with my teen's 'What's the point' point of view. The curriculum isn't relevant to the things he needs to know to be successful in life, eg writing non-fiction & arguments well (instead of so much time analyzing literature), and managing finances (rather than advanced theoretical math). Yet there are no alternatives offered at school, and he ends up unable to concentrate in a boring class and feels like a failure (though eager to learn in relevant out-of-school interests!)."

Motivation Hurdle #4: Battered Self-Esteem

“How do you motivate a 15-year-old with ADHD/ODD to get back on track with school? He went from As & Bs his freshman year to failing almost every subject this year. And he’s also mildly gifted.”

Motivation Hurdle #5: Disrupted Routines Destroy Momentum

“How to help a recent high school graduate who used to have to get up for school and function during a full school day, that now can’t get up before noon, doesn’t have a job, and isn’t motivated to engage with the world. Without the structure of school he is floundering.”

To learn more about the common hurdles to motivation among teens with ADHD, and to hear expert solutions for overcoming those hurdles, listen to the ADDitude Expert Webinar [“My Teen with ADHD Lacks All Motivation”](#) by Maggie Sibley, Ph.D., which was broadcast live on November 9, 2022.

Motivation for Teens with ADHD: Next Steps

- **Download:** [4 Secrets to Motivating Students with ADHD](#)
- **Read:** [The Secret of ADHD Motivation, Solved](#)
- **Read:** [How Teachers Can Reach Unmotivated Students](#)

with ADHD