

**FROM**

**APATHETIC**

**TO**

**ENGAGED**


***A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE  
TO HELPING KIDS FIND  
THEIR DRIVE***

**KindLED**  
Powered by prenda

# WELCOME

Welcome to Prenda's guide to helping kids find their drive! We hope this guide will help you understand the science behind how you help the "young humans" in your life make the switch from apathetic to engaged—be you a parent, teacher, guide, coach, or youth leader in your community. Spoiler alert, it has little to do with curriculum or finding the right sticker chart and everything to do with becoming adults who understand how to build authentic relationships, facilitate personalized experiences, and help young humans step into their autonomy.

## THE QUESTION



What do you hope for the young humans in your life? There are many ways to answer this question and every person will have a unique, personalized, and interesting response. However, most people agree that we all want the young people in our lives to grow up to lead happy, successful, meaningful lives. However, despite generations of parents and teachers holding this general intention, according to statistics, few of us are hitting the "happy, successful, meaningful life" mark as adults. Research indicates that only 15% of people worldwide report being "[very happy](#)," (a [50-year low](#) in America). 40% of Americans [struggle to pay](#) basic household bills, and only 15–30 percent of employees say they find [purpose](#), and [meaning](#), or [are passionate about](#) their work. Overall, we are feeling overwhelmed and apathetic, not energized and motivated. And it's not just us; it's our kids too.

## THE DATA

The data clearly show that our youth are struggling and that most of the issues are getting worse. For example, [suicide](#), [depression](#), [anxiety](#), [illiteracy rates](#), the incidence of [bullying](#), and [cheating](#) are all on the rise while [motivation and engagement](#) rates are reportedly falling. We also see alarmingly low national [academic proficiency](#) across

subjects. Although we would all agree that this is not what we want for our children and students, for some reason we have not yet divested ourselves from the beliefs, strategies, and frameworks that perpetuate these results. Why do we persist unabated despite the evidence that what we are doing isn't working and is even hurting our children? Well, maybe we just don't know another way.

Great news! After watching thousands of students in Prenda Micro-schools make the switch from apathetic to motivated, anxious to grounded, dependent to self-reliant, overwhelmed to hopeful, we thought we'd take a minute and explain what we do, why it works and how you can get similar results in your family, classroom, and community. It comes down to operationalizing some basic ideas that were originally put forward in 1985 by psychology researchers Richard Ryan and Edward Deci when they established a little something called "[Self Determination Theory](#)" (SDT).

## THE SCIENCE

Over the past 40 years, Self Determination Theory has become a well-respected and evidence-based psychological framework. Essentially, SDT posits that there are three essential human psychological "needs" that are required if we want to see humans stepping into their full potential and truly thriving. In the discussion that follows, we go deep into the science and practical application of how we can create learning environments, homes, teams, youth groups etc. that help the young humans in our lives get these basic needs met and therefore, feel motivated and thrive as whole people. The good news is that these ideas can be easily applied in whatever situation you find yourself in. They are also simple and inexpensive. Want to know what they are?

**LET'S GO.**



# NEED 1: UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

*“Every child needs at least one adult that is irrationally crazy about them.”*

–Urie Bronfenbrenner

## THE PROBLEM

Imagine a newborn baby just a few minutes old. What’s the first thing that baby needs?

If you said “air,” you’re correct. What’s the second thing it needs?

If you said “food” or “shelter,” you’re close.

That baby does need food and shelter, but the only way it can get all the other things it needs is if it happens to bump into at least one person who knows what the baby needs and cares enough to provide it. It needs someone to look at its completely incapable chubby little face and scrawny chicken legs and say, “That thing is important. I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep that thing alive.”

Without this early act of relationship, or positive regard, the human race wouldn’t have made it far (e.g.: adorable healthy newborn – adults + lions = no more healthy, adorable newborn). For this reason, our brains are biologically hardwired to associate community, connection, and relationship with safety and survival. The brain knows that by itself it won’t last long so it sees anything that weakens these relationships as a very real threat to physical survival and it responds by activating the “sympathetic nervous system.” This causes increased levels of adrenaline and cortisol to course through the brain, sending the unsuspecting young human into “fight or flight” mode, similar to how it would respond if there was a lion around. No big deal? Think again.

The activation of the sympathetic nervous system shuts down access to the area of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex. What in the world is that? Oh, it’s just the part of the brain that [handles things like](#) forethought, empathy, impulse control, predicting the consequences of one’s actions, managing emotions, following through on a plan, goal



setting, attention, and memory. This is the part of the brain that is curious and reasonable. This is the part of the brain that pays attention and sticks with something long enough to get an A. The part that says, “don’t hit your sister” and “I should go to bed earlier.” This is the part of the brain that we expect kids to be using all the time.

Unfortunately, we often rely on strategies and frameworks that actually trigger the child’s sympathetic nervous system, causing reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex. Shucks.

Now, most adults are more than well-intentioned, and most of us are doing our darndest to provide strong relationships for our kids and students! But here’s the thing, threats to relationships are **SUBTLE** and can sneak in even with the best of intentions. While we as parents, teachers, coaches, etc. talk about how much we love our kids and students, **we simultaneously send signals to their brains that our acceptance and approval are actually quite conditional.** We are showing them through our disappointed faces and tones, consequences, and also our excitement and pride that our “positive regard” for them is actually based on their ability to behave socially or perform as a student or athlete. Really? Yep. Let’s look at some examples...

### SITUATION

I’m a 7th grader. I just brought home a -D on an algebra test. I feel terrible about myself, and I’m terrified that my mom is going to be so mad.



### ADULT RESPONSE

When I tell my mom about my grade, she tells me I am lazy and that I can’t play soccer until I get my grades up. I feel stupid and hopeless about math and I’m so mad that I can’t play soccer. It’s the only time I feel like people actually like me.



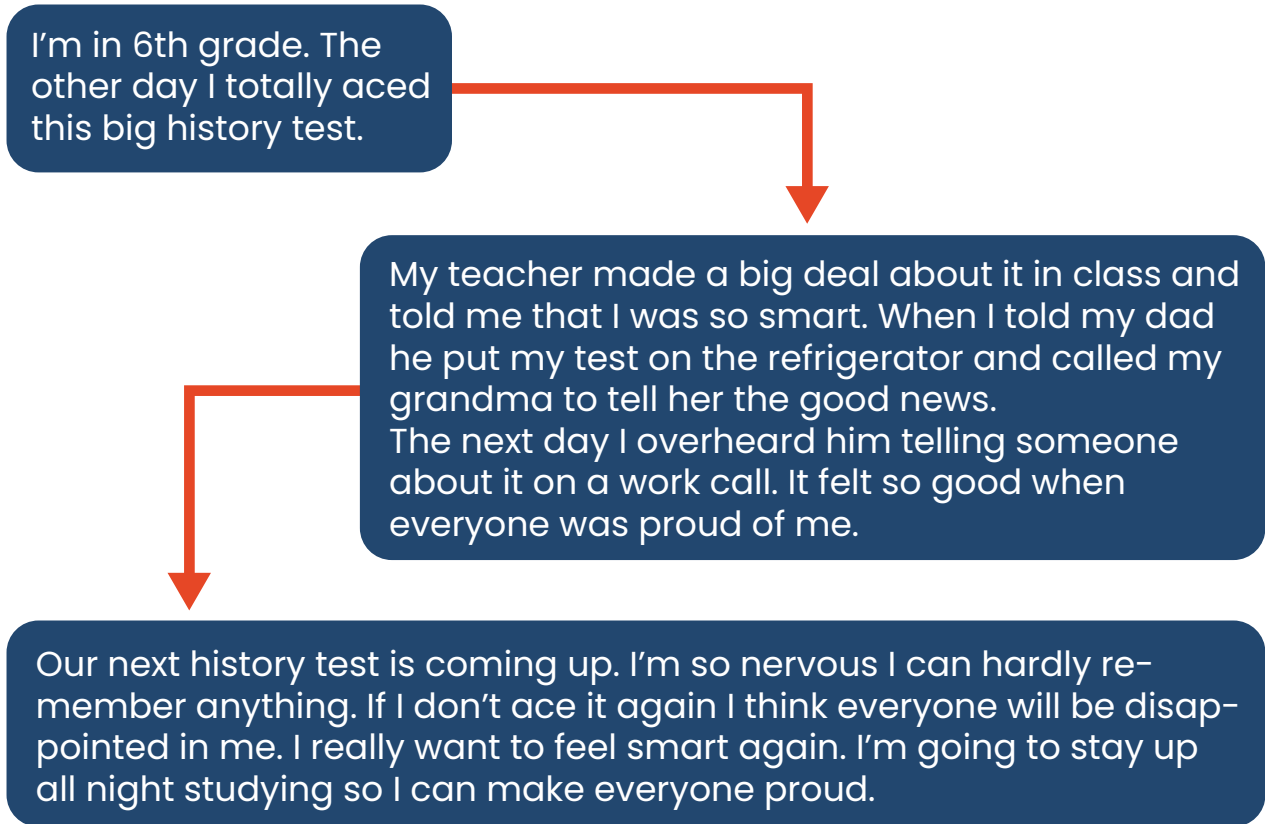
### RESULT

I should never have signed up for this advanced math class. Next time I’m going to take the easier class or maybe I should just cheat like the other kids do.

Sound familiar? Can you see how it wasn't the bad grade that led the student to conclude that they should cheat or avoid challenges in the future? The student felt like their value was conditional, their sympathetic nervous system was activated, which made them defensive, and then they drew logical conclusions based on their experience. Conditional positive regard.

It makes intuitive sense that responding to kids negatively would cause this but what about when they do well? Surely responding positively to success can't be bad, right?

Let's look at an example of a successful student...



Did you notice how the successful test score wasn't the cause of the later anxiety and unhealthy sleep habits? It was the **adult reaction** to the success that made it seem like future failures may put these valued relationships at risk. Conditional positive regard.

Essentially, if the student does not find themselves in an environment where they feel unconditionally accepted and valued **despite** their academic struggles or successes, they are likely to be in a relatively constant state of nervous system activation. From this mental state, it is nearly impossible for them to find a healthy inner drive to achieve or any kind of sustainable mental well-being. But wait! If we accept and approve of them regardless of their performance they will think that anything goes! What about correcting them and pushing them toward excellence? What about holding kids to high expectations and accountability and and and...

I hear you, teacher.

I hear you, mama.

I hear you, coach.

I hear you, pastor.


We want the young humans in our lives to work, win, and develop, and we are so right to want those things. Here's the catch, though- our kids naturally want those things too. **It is already in them to want to do well.** The kids who seem disengaged and careless are that way because they have been repeatedly denied the acceptance, love, and compassion they once sought. When you offer them unconditional positive regard, their brain's need for it will be satiated and they will have so much more motivation and mental energy to excel. You will also see them naturally aligning with your values and following your example!



**WIN!**








Apathy grows out of a lack of acceptance. It is not natural. It's what happens when you think that no matter what you try, you can't win. And for lots of kids, that's their honest-to-goodness lived experience. All of their environments and relationships are so steeped in conditional positive regard that they can't wrangle their brain waves enough to actually behave or excel and the cycle just repeats itself.

## THE SOLUTION

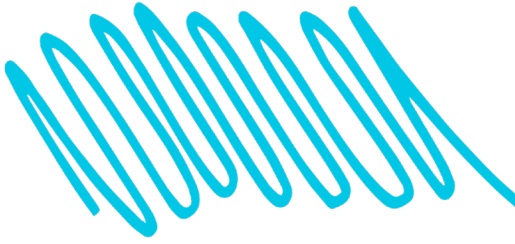
So how do we right this ship? The answer, as you may have guessed, is to build environments and relationships where there is plenty of unconditional positive regard "in the soil." This means that regardless of how they are performing in the classroom, on the field, or with their peers that we are warm and inviting, that we are speaking all the good we can speak, and that we believe day in and day out that there is a well-intentioned, powerful individual under any misbehavior, academic struggle, or snotty attitude—a young human who desperately wishes they could be doing better and wants more than anything to be seen as good and accepted by you.

Studies show that the presence of strong and consistent relationships in a student's life can predict high school graduation rates [with 77% accuracy](#) with those who benefited from strong relationships outperforming those who did not. That's more predictive than an IQ test or an achievement test! Research has also shown that in [rats](#), [bunnies](#), and [humans](#), the presence of a reliable and nurturing relationship improved a wide range of factors including increased problem-solving skills, confidence, independence, and academic achievement, while decreasing anxiety, impulsiveness, and other mental and physical health issues. What does providing this kind of unconditional positive regard look like in action?






Let's rewind our scenarios and watch how they could have gone differently if the adults in these situations would have been focused on providing unconditional positive regard and practicing proactive acceptance regardless of performance or behavior.



I'm a 7th grader. I just brought home a D- on an algebra test. I feel terrible about myself and I'm terrified my mom is going to be so mad.


When I told my mom about it she gave me a hug and said "I bet you feel terrible. I'm sorry things didn't go how you wanted them to go. I know you tried your best. What can I do to support you?" We worked together on a plan to help me get focused. I think I've been distracted by soccer- I really love to play. We decided that I was going to take a 2-week break from soccer so I could have more time for math homework. I'll hate missing soccer but I get it.

I feel disappointed that I'm not doing better in math. I wish it just came easy to me but I see now that is going to take some work. I could have taken an easier math class but I'm proud of myself for taking on a challenge. I'm glad my mom is on my side and that she still thinks I'm smart and hard-working even when I struggle. I feel like I can come to her with anything.




Look at this mom go!! She's dishing out the unconditional positive regard like mashed potatoes and clearly demonstrating to her son that he is valuable, acceptable, and good regardless of his current performance. Did she ignore the problem and say that his performance didn't matter? No, but she absolutely stayed connected and helped him make a plan.


Should we see what was going on in her mind just for funsies? Let's take a peek.




My son just brought home a D- on his algebra test and at first, I was so mad and embarrassed. I knew he had been playing soccer too much and ignoring his homework. He really needs to learn his lesson. I wanted to tell him he was lazy and take soccer away but something stopped me. I saw how disappointed he was in himself and I remembered how he had opted into this more challenging math class voluntarily. I remembered how disappointed I had felt as a girl when I didn't do well.



I took a minute to compose myself in the pantry (while I snagged some chocolate chips). I took some deep breaths and thought about how frustrated he must feel. I gave him a hug and tried to show him that I was on his side and that I still assumed the best of him. Instead of correcting and punishing, I tried to work with him to solve the problem. Once he saw that I wasn't mad, he started crying out of relief and he was really willing to work together to figure out a plan to help him manage his time better- after all, he's only 12 and he doesn't have a fully functioning prefrontal cortex so it's understandable that he would need some support here.



My son brought home a B- on his next test. A huge improvement. He was still a little disappointed. He knows he can do better- but I'm just glad he is seeing how dedicating more time to something can pay off. The other day some kids were trying to get him to do something that we have a family rule against. Unfortunately, he went along with them and broke our rule but after school, he came to me right away and told me all about how sorry he was. I'm so glad he sees me as someone he can talk to about anything.



Wow, look at how this mom pushed through her inclination to withhold her positive regard and instead leaned into empathy and radical compassion. So hard to do at the moment, but the long-term benefit of being her son's safest place absolutely paid off.

What about responding to success?

I'm in 6th grade. The other day I totally aced this big history test.

My teacher celebrated my win in class by pointing out how I had spent so much time preparing. It felt great! She also recognized another kid for making the most personal improvement and another kid for the most creative free-response answer. When I told my dad he was proud of me for working so hard but he also said that no matter what grades I brought home the most important thing was that I was learning how to learn.

Our next history test is coming up. I'm excited to see how I do. This stuff is so interesting to me! I've been studying really hard but I'm not stressed about it. I know my teacher and my parents care about me as a person, not just a test score.

Ah, the sweet sweet sound of strong mental well-being. All because the adults in this situation didn't overemphasize the importance of a grade. It is so easy in situations where kids succeed to accidentally tie acceptance and value to bringing those grades home. Nicely done, folks! You celebrated the win but broadened your appreciation to the child's effort while also remembering to value improvement and creativity.

**CUE THE APPLAUSE.**

So what's the take-home here? It's simple. In order for young humans to have a shot at creating a happy, successful, and meaningful life, we need to be demonstrating unconditional positive regard for them in every interaction. Their brains are hardwired to seek our approval and to make us proud. If they don't get this, their brains will never be able to unleash their full power or be motivated by something greater than seeking approval.

Does this mean we give up on academic rigor, high expectations, and pro-social behaviors? NO! It just means that the path to actually helping them achieve and show up as their best selves doesn't lie in conditional regard. It is totally possible to create challenging, rigorous educational experiences and well-ordered homes as we hold students to high expectations [in a way that supports typical human brain function and development.](#)



# UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD CHEAT SHEET

*Here's a quick summary of ways you can implement this TODAY  
with any young human you interact with...*

## DO THIS

### Show them you want them around

- Talk directly to them
- Use their name
- Intentionally greet them
- Smile & make eye contact
- Use a warm tone
- Laugh with them
- Appropriate touch
- Communicate acceptance: "I'm so glad you came today" or "I missed you all day!"

### Create or encourage small groups where there is lots of opportunity for 1-1 interaction and mentorship.

This looks like...

- Microschools
- Homeschooling
- Learning Centers
- Co-ops

### Make time to play, to be silly, to do things that aren't associated with a productive outcome.

This sounds like...

- "YES, I do have time to shoot some hoops after work today"

### Destigmatize Struggle. Respond equally to success or failure.

This sounds like...

- "I love how you didn't let that wrong answer get you frustrated, you just asked more questions and powered through."

### Praise efforts and intentions not outcomes.

This sounds like...

- "Hey Coach, did you see that shot I made?" "Yes, I can tell your dedication to practice is really paying off."

## ~~NOT THAT~~

### Show them you want them to go

- Ignore their presence
- Look at your phone
- Find ways to occupy them without your presence
- Use a cold or neutral tone
- Show disappointment and annoyance with facial expressions
- Communicate criticism: "You need to focus more" or "You are so lazy"

### Create or allow large groups where building 1-1 relationships is difficult.

This looks like...

- 1 adult to more than 15 children
- Depersonalized settings where children are not seen and heard as individuals
- Any setting where you feel like you are herding cats

### Persist in your very important adult business all the time.

This sounds like...

- "Sorry bud, that's kid stuff- I have stuff I need to get done."

### Respond well to success and negatively to struggle, failure, or misbehavior.

This sounds like...

- "Come on, you knew that one- we just worked on that problem yesterday."

### Praise outcomes and ignore effort or intention

This sounds like...

- "Hey Coach, did you see that shot I made?" "Yes, it's awesome that you scored!"

## UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD SELF REFLECTION

How were you shown or not shown unconditional positive regard as you were growing up? Think of a relationship where you felt like you were accepted and seen as good no matter what. What influence or effect has that relationship had on your life?

---

---

---

## UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD AFFIRMATIONS

It takes a lot of time and intention to become the kind of adult who is able to offer unconditional positive regard to young humans. Here are some new thoughts or affirmations that you can use to help you make this transition.

“They are doing the best they can under the circumstances.”

“Behavior is just information, it doesn’t mean anything about what kind of person a child is.”

“I’m curious about the root cause of this behavior or struggle.”

“What does this child need that they aren’t getting? How can I help them get it?”

“How did I experience similar struggles as I was growing up?”

“This is just an opportunity for me to show them that our relationship can handle struggle.”

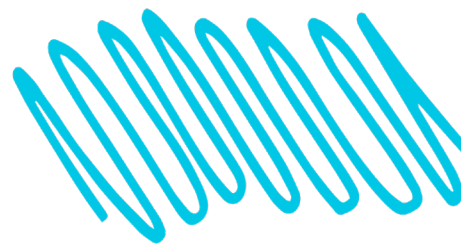
## UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

[How Children Succeed](#) by Paul Tough

[Rest, Play, Grow](#) by Deborah Macnamera

[Permission to Feel](#) by Marc Brackett

[Wiring the Brain for Success](#) TedEx by Becky Bailey





## NEED 2: PERSISTENT DIFFERENTIATION

*"In differentiation, not uniformity,  
lies the path to progress"*

-Louis D Brandeis

### THE PROBLEM

Everyone knows that while each student in a classroom of 30 was born within the same 12-month window, their level of comprehension of any given subject and their readiness to move forward in new learning varies on, coincidentally, about 30 different axes. The ask of teachers is to "differentiate" their instruction so that every student in that room gets what they need. This is a big problem for students since they are only getting the instruction they need for a small portion of the time they are in the classroom. It's also a big problem for teachers who have to have multiple lesson plans prepared every day. Not a great situation for anyone involved, yet we persist.

Educational research has shown that in order to maximize student growth and achievement, students need to spend a lot of time learning in their "[Zone of Proximal Development](#)" (ZPD). This is also called "the goldilocks zone" or your "learning frontier" if you ask a Prenda kid. It's the level of difficulty that is just outside of your current level of capability. Challenges feel engaging, but doable, creating an atmosphere of "[hard fun](#)" or "[productive struggle](#)." This allows learners to feel pushed but not overwhelmed. Goals feel ambitious but achievable. Carefully managing, or differentiating, the difficulty of what we are asking of kids leads to an underlying feeling of competence.

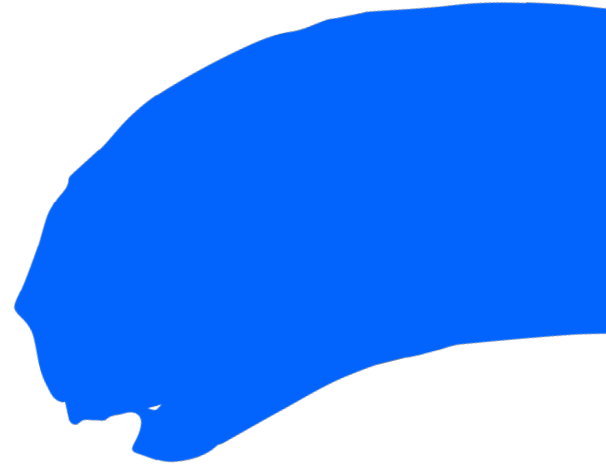
Ryan and Deci point to competence as one of the three basic psychological needs that all humans require to fully thrive. They assert that when humans can see a tie between their behavior and a desired outcome, we often become motivated to perform the behavior to achieve the outcome, but when we see that the behavior does not achieve the desired outcome, we become demotivated and the likelihood of repeating the behavior decreases. To put this in context, if a young human sits down to do their math homework with the desired outcome of getting a good grade on a test, but despite their effort, they fail the test, they learn that the behavior of sitting down to do their math





homework didn't work. They put in the effort but didn't get the desired outcome. If this persists, their motivation to do their math homework will weaken and weaken. On the other hand, if they sit down to do their math homework with the intent of getting a good grade and they succeed or at least improve, they learn that doing their homework is a viable path to a good grade and they are more likely to repeat that behavior with strong motivation.

It follows that if we are persistently putting math problems in front of learners that they are not prepared for, over time, they will learn that their efforts are ineffective. They lack the competence to reach the desired outcome and their motivation will tank, sinking them into the pit of apathy we so commonly see in our youth.



## THE SOLUTION

So what do we do? How can we build educational systems that support learners in their need to perceive themselves as competent? Persistent differentiation is the answer. This means that **all or most** of a learner's minutes are spent at their own personal learning frontier.

What! But that's impossible!

Actually, great news, it isn't. It might have been 20 years ago, but we live in the age of adaptive educational technology which, when used appropriately and in concert with a caring human who is providing unconditional positive regard, has the potential to differentiate content for kids at a level of detail that can only be matched by a 1-1 student-teacher ratio. This idea is known as "mastery" and it is illegal in most states. Seriously? Yep, seriously. At the time of this writing, if you are using state/federal funds to educate a child, you are required to expose that child to their grade level content regardless of whether or not they are ready for it or have already mastered it. Veering off this exposure schedule is tantamount to treason in the education world. These laws make it nearly impossible to create a competency-supportive learning environment. Yikes.

So if you are thinking about setting up a learning environment, a team,



a community, or if you are looking for educational options for your family, think deeply about how you are going to personalize the experience for each child. How will you meet each young human's need for individualized pacing and give them the support they need to succeed? As a teacher, that might mean making whole group instruction time a smaller portion of your day and differentiation time a greater focus. You could also explore how ed-tech tools might help students access content that is just right for them or talk to your district admins about advocating for mastery-based approaches in the classroom!

Parents, find a place where your student will be allowed to follow a mastery-based curriculum. Ask your teachers about it if your kids go to a traditional school. If you homeschool, take a mastery-based approach and work to help your students embrace the idea that everyone learns at a different pace and that there is no shame in hitting content over and over again and in different ways before rushing on to the next chapter. You can also actively work to destigmatize the concept of being "behind" (working below "grade level") or "ahead" (working above grade level) as this helps to lessen the shame around having to backtrack a bit to fill in your learning gaps. This further increases the feeling of competence a student can experience, even in the midst of struggle. Yay!

## **DIFFERENTIATION ISN'T JUST FOR ACADEMICS**


The idea of competency isn't just important in the academic world. It also applies to social-emotional learning and behavior.

Let's taco bout it.



In the same way that every child is on their own academic learning path, they are also on their own social-emotional and behavioral development path. However, we as parents, educators, and daycare workers, etc. often fall into the trap of expecting much more than kids are capable of, accidentally creating a world of expectations where many young humans are left feeling constantly incompetent — like they "should" be able to do something that is just out of their grasp.

Imagine you are playing with a 6-month-old baby. They want a toy that is a few feet away from them and they can't reach it.



Do you yell at the baby for not being able to walk over and get it? Do you put the baby in time-out until they can learn to walk and pick things up appropriately? Do you chastise them when they cry? No, obviously not. In the case of a baby not walking or talking **we all accept that it would be outrageous for us to expect these capabilities**, so no one is frustrated by the baby's lack of ability here. It's normal, and we have created a world for babies — a culture, a network of relationships and social agreements — that account for these incapacities. We don't put babies in situations where they would need to walk and talk and we don't give moms with nonwalking babies dirty looks at the park. But we do expect 2 year olds to have enough [impulse control](#) to not hit. We expect 4-year-olds to have the [theory of mind](#) to imagine how their actions make someone else feel, and we expect 13-year-olds to be able to "calm down" and "[control themselves](#)." None of these expectations are backed by psychological or neurological research, just like a 6-month-old not walking, yet we criticize and consequence these behaviors ad nauseam.

What to do instead? Persistent differentiation. Just like we would observe a missing math concept in a student's understanding and move to review and provide practice opportunities, we can observe missing skills in a child's behavioral repertoire. When we see a gap, instead of criticizing or punishing, move to support, model, and teach while maintaining our unconditional positive regard. This might look like non-punitively removing a child from a situation they are clearly not ready for, or it might look like rehearsing how they can react in tricky situations, giving them the words they need to interact with peers appropriately, helping them choose strong thoughts that you know will help calm their nervous system, or providing supported opportunities to practice.

# PERSISTENT DIFFERENTIATION CHEAT SHEET

*Here's a quick summary of ways you can implement this TODAY with any young human you interact with:*

## DO THIS

### **Focus on identifying knowledge and skill gaps before diving into instruction.**

This looks like...

- Mastery-based learning
- Using data to support instruction
- Observing struggles and successes with empathy instead of judgment

### **Narrate what's going right and what it means out loud**

This sounds like...

- "I saw you share your crayons with the new girl, that shows me that you really know how to make people feel welcome"

### **Respond to struggle with empathy and support**

This sounds like...

- Not putting kids in situations where you know they will likely struggle
- Provide supports, direct teaching, scripts, and repeated modeling
- Believing that they would have done better if they could have

### **Adapt expectations to reasonable developmental norms, then differentiate even further for individuals**

This looks like...

- Asking "What do they need to be successful here?"
- Destigmatizing different levels of performance or behavior
- Creating a culture where it's OK to work at a different pace without shame

### **Expressing confidence in their abilities**

This sounds like...

- "You've got this"
- "I trust you"

## ~~NOT THAT~~

### **Insist that all young humans progress along the same path with the same timing.**

This looks like...

- Ignoring learning gaps in favor of keeping on schedule
- Forming stigmatizing ability groupings
- Setting expectations too high or too low

### **Narrate what's going wrong and what it means out loud**

This sounds like...

- "Can't you just be nice to people? Why are you so selfish?"

### **Respond to struggle with punishments or consequences**

This sounds like...

- Isolating kids who are struggling by punitively disallowing their participation
- Withholding privileges or items until the desired behavior is seen
- Lecturing about what they "should" have done

### **Holding developmentally inappropriate or arbitrary expectations and insisting that everyone be able to meet them**

This looks like...

- Asking "How can I make them comply or perform?"
- Reinforcing the idea that everyone needs to be the same and stay "on track"
- Creating a culture where performance and achievement are more important than growth

### **Expressing doubt in their abilities**

This sounds like...

- "You never stay focused"
- "Don't mess up"

## PERSISTENT DIFFERENTIATION SELF-REFLECTION

Think of a time that you felt like you just couldn't win as a kid. How did this make you feel? Close your eyes and focus on this feeling. How did the adults around you react to your struggle? Do you wish they had reacted differently?

---

---

---

## PERSISTENT DIFFERENTIATION AFFIRMATIONS

It takes a lot of time and intention to become the kind of adult who is able to offer persistent differentiation to young humans. Here are some new thoughts or affirmations that you can use to help you make this transition.

"How is this struggle normal, expected, and understandable?"

"What labels am I subconsciously using for this struggling child? Are these labels true? Are they helpful?"

"What skills, information, or experience does this child need to improve?"

"When am I seeing this child succeed? How can I notice what's going right?"

"How can I bring a feeling of competence into this moment of struggle?"

"How might I adjust my expectations and provide the support this child needs?"

## PERSISTENT DIFFERENTIATION RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

[Sal Khan TED Talk: Let's Teach for Mastery](#)

[Khan Academy: What is Mastery Learning?](#)

[The Mastery Learning Handbook](#) (great for teachers!)



## NEED 3: SUPPORTIVE AUTONOMY

*“Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him.”*

–Booker T. Washington

### THE PROBLEM

Anyone who has spent 10 minutes with a 2-year-old is all too familiar with the redundant and insistent phrase, “me do it by myself.” This developmental shift to independence and drive for autonomy happens early and ubiquitously across humanity. It starts in toddlerhood, persists throughout adolescence and, in fact, never really goes away. [Ryan and Deci show repeatedly](#) that a low level of autonomy is directly tied to increased anxiety, depression, stress, lack of motivation, and a strengthened resistance to any external attempts of guidance or direction. Stressed? Unmotivated? Resistant? Sound like any student you know?

That’s right, autonomy is the third foundational human need that must be considered if we want to see kids thriving. If we want to see strong motivation in our kids and students, we need to create environments and relationships that are supportive of their autonomy. Autonomy means that you have some level of perceived control over your life. You have choices, your choices matter, and it’s up to you to steer your own boat.

Remember the last time your boss micromanaged you or your spouse let you know that your way of doing something wasn’t right? How did you respond? Probably not with an increased desire to do things their way, right? That’s because you are an adult and society acknowledges your unalienable right to your freedom. When our lives become too coercive or restraints too narrow, we feel a decreased sense of happiness, life satisfaction, and motivation. We all naturally bristle at being too tightly controlled.

While freely granted to adults, this degree of self-determination or agency is not granted to young humans. As adults, we tend to assume that most young people are irresponsible and that they can’t be trusted, that if we let them make big choices they will steer themselves off







a proverbial cliff, wreaking havoc in their lives (and therefore, in our lives). From this vantage point, it seems logical for us to control and compel as much as possible to ensure that kids stay on track (for their own good and for the sake of our sanity and society).

Because of these common assumptions, we often place young humans in situations that, to quote Alfie Kohn – psychology professor and author of “Punished by Rewards” – invite children to ask, “What does this adult want me to do? What do I get if I do it and what happens to me if I don’t?” It’s hard to see, but most of the common classroom management, parenting, and coaching tools used to lead children are actually types of “gentle threats.” For example, we have the positive, “if you dos:” praise, gold stars, sticker charts, pom pom jars and the negative, “if you don’ts:” green/yellow/red cards, detention, withholding recess, and the entire concept of grades. However, these methods come at a cost. [Research has shown](#) that these methods don’t help students become the curious, honest, lifelong learners we are intending to create and the motivation they cause is always short-lived. Instead, using punishments and bribes to compel behavior leads to decreased motivation, disinterest, and even lower performance. However, they can make kids pay attention, be quiet, or run faster so we keep using them. It’s understandable, but there is [a different way](#).

## THE SOLUTION

In reality, controlling our kids doesn’t actually play out the way we want it to because inside every little human is a healthy dose of self-determination, and no matter how hard you scrub, (darn it!) it just doesn’t come out. So what do we do instead? How do we peel back generations of coercive, authoritarian parenting and teaching and start helping young humans learn how to harness their autonomy for their greatest good?

It all starts with our beliefs about young humans and their capacity to be trusted. When we start with a belief that kids are incapable, we land ourselves in a micromanage-y desert wasteland and instead of high engagement and curiosity, our kids become reliant on whatever carrots and sticks we invent to prod them along. This isn’t fun for us and it isn’t fun for them.

What if instead, we started with the assumption suggested by Ned



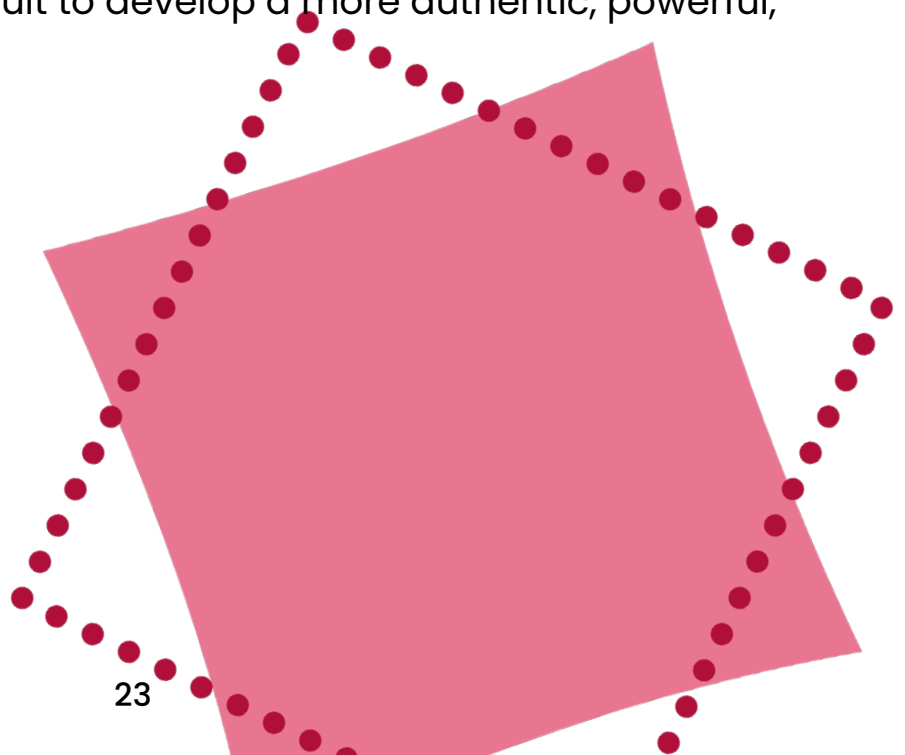




Jonson and neuropsychologist William Stixrud in their seminal work, [The Self-Driven Child](#) that, “kids have brains in their heads and want their lives to work and that with some support, they’ll figure out what to do.” If we were to believe that kids could be trusted, that with support, they could manage big important decisions as well as most of the daily minutia of their lives, our relationships, conversations, and institutions would look significantly different.

These beliefs lead to a natural shift in how we treat young humans. Instead of ravenous wolverines that need to be corralled and subdued, we see them as respectable citizens of the world. Instead of positioning ourselves as carpenters—molding inanimate objects, or as managers—trying to keep students in line, or as train engineers—keeping everyone on schedule, we become their [trusted consultants, their tour guides, and the gardeners](#) that provide nutrients, scaffolding, and protection when needed.

With this new framing of our role, we invite them into the deep waters of responsibility and wrap them up in our confidence. They in turn feel the weight of their choices and “having a brain in their head and wanting their lives to work out,” naturally begin to seek our advice, follow our example, and learn from their missteps. They gradually see that instead of a vending machine of carrots or a gauntlet of sticks, we are actually people who care about them deeply and have some ideas about what is in the best interest of their future selves. In order for this to happen, we have to better understand how our use of bribes and punishments makes it difficult to develop a more authentic, powerful, and longer-lasting drive.



Our friends Ryan and Deci explain that motivation falls along a spectrum. On one end, we have “amotivation” which means that you don’t care to do the thing and so you don’t. In the middle of the spectrum, we find several different types of “extrinsic motivation.” This means that there is some degree of external push to do the thing, **with some types of extrinsic motivation being lower on the autonomy** scale and others incorporating greater levels of autonomy. On the other end of the spectrum, we find intrinsic motivation. This kind of motivation is fueled by enjoyment, satisfaction, or interest.

In [Edward Deci’s TedTalk](#), as well as in [more in-depth publications](#), Ryan and Deci summarize numerous studies that show how moving toward more autonomous motivation types leads to less resistance to the behavior or action, motivation that lasts longer, higher quality of work, increases in physical and mental well-being, and greater levels of engagement. Jackpot! The key to helping young humans find their drive and put down the lightsabers of resistance lies in understanding where the methods we use fall along this spectrum. When we understand how motivation works we can be more judicious in how we think and act so kids can enjoy all of the benefits that are associated with more autonomous motivation. Let’s dive in here by looking at the various types of motivation.

Ryan and Deci have very scientific names for these types but we’ve renamed them and simplified a few things for your convenience.



## TYPE 0 – THE NOPE:

This type of motivation is actually the state of not being motivated. There is no desire to do the action or behavior, so it doesn't happen.

Examples:

- You choose to not do your homework
- You choose to not meet your curfew
- You choose to hit your friend when they take your toy
- You choose to drink at parties

**Summary:** You just don't care to do or not do the thing no matter what.

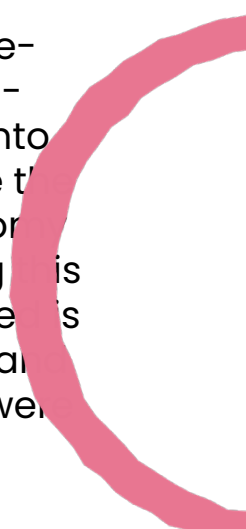
## TYPE 1 – THE CANDY:

This is the first type of extrinsic motivation. It relies completely on external controls and the desire to either get or not get something.

Examples:

- You do your homework because your teacher will give you a sticker every time you complete an assignment.
- You make sure you meet your curfew because your dad will ground you if you are late.
- You don't hit your friend when they take your toy because you don't want your card moved to yellow.
- You don't drink at a party because your parents would take your car away if they found out.

**Summary:** A person other than yourself does or does not do something if you behave in a certain way. Any type of reward or punishment that an adult uses to encourage a behavior in a child falls into this category. This is the lowest form of extrinsic motivation where the person being controlled does not experience any sense of autonomy in performing the behavior. The likelihood of someone performing this behavior in the absence of being monitored, punished, or rewarded is low. For example, if you knew your dad had already fallen asleep and you wouldn't know when you got home, you wouldn't make sure you were home on time.



## TYPE 2 – THE JUDGMENT:

The second type of extrinsic motivation relies on you feeling that you should or should not do something because if you do/don't your social group will think a certain thing about you.

Examples:

- You do your homework because your teacher will give you a sticker every time you complete an assignment.
- You make sure you meet your curfew because your dad will ground you if you are late.
- You don't hit your friend when they take your toy because you don't want your card moved to yellow.
- You don't drink at a party because your parents would take your car away if they found out.

**Summary:** A person other than yourself does or does not do something if you behave in a certain way. Any type of reward or punishment that an adult uses to encourage a behavior in a child falls into this category. This is the lowest form of extrinsic motivation where the person being controlled does not experience any sense of autonomy in performing the behavior. The likelihood of someone performing this behavior in the absence of being monitored, punished, or rewarded is low. For example, if you knew your dad had already fallen asleep and wouldn't know when you got home, you wouldn't make sure you were home on time.

### **TYPE 3 – THE PURPOSE:**

The third type of extrinsic motivation relies on you doing something because the action is in alignment with a value or goal that is personally important to you.

Examples:

- You do your homework because you want to become a doctor so you can help others.
- You make sure you meet your curfew because you want to be someone who is trustworthy.
- You don't hit your friend when they take your toy because you value non-violence.
- You don't drink at a party because you value your health & safety.

**Summary:** Acting in a way that is in alignment with the values or goals you have decided are important. You do these things because they are congruent with or tied to future states of being or accomplishments that you find desirable. You experience greater autonomy with this type of motivation because you are the one deciding what values and goals are important to you and what actions are in alignment with these things. There isn't an outside party you are trying to please, but



you aren't doing these things because they are inherently "enjoyable." Rather, you know that they are important and can influence the future in a preferred way. They are part of your personal purpose. You don't need anyone to be watching or monitoring your behavior here, you behave this way out of duty or the desire to achieve a personal goal.

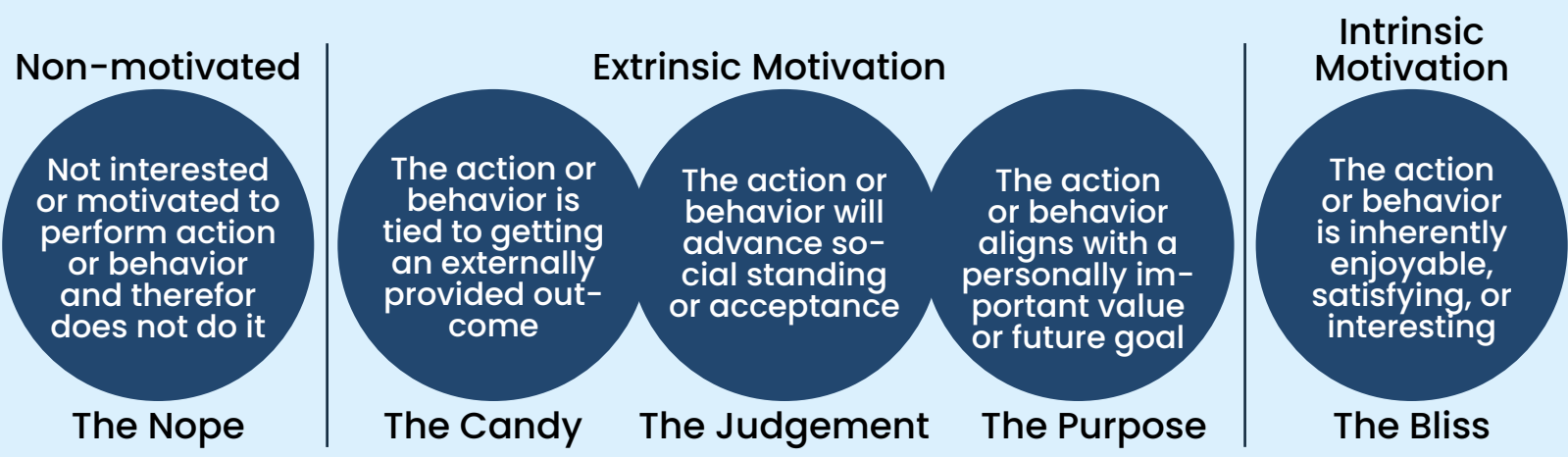
## TYPE 4 - THE BLISS:

This is intrinsic motivation. This is that sweet place where you are doing something that is profoundly interesting, enjoyable, exciting, or satisfying for no reason but that you love it.

Examples:

- You do your homework because you just think quadratic equations are fascinating.
- You make sure you meet curfew because you can't wait to snuggle into your bed and get a good night's rest.
- You don't hit your friend when they take your toy because you love seeing them so happy.
- You don't drink at a party because you love being sober.

**Summary:** Participating in this activity is enjoyable! It might be "obviously" enjoyable like eating tacos, playing, or watching your favorite movie but you can also enjoy things like coding a computer program, researching quantum mechanics, reading a biography, mastering the art of watercolor, or writing a story. Humans find inherent enjoyment in doing lots of things.



*Adapted from Ryan and Deci, 2018 Fig 8.1*



If we want kids who are less resistant to doing the things that are “good” for them and we want to stop the power struggles that inevitably ensue when there is a conflict of wills, we should be laser-focused on helping each young human identify their personal purpose for learning, behaving, or working hard (extrinsic, but highly autonomous motivation) and letting them spend time exploring their natural passions, curiosities, and interests (intrinsic and super autonomous motivation). As we shift away from using methods that fall into “the candy” or “the judgment” categories, and towards “the purpose” and “the bliss” buckets, our job changes from forcing students towards competence or compliance against their will to guiding them towards tools and experiences they can use to move themselves (and thereby the world) forward into a bright and meaningful future.

## **POWER STRUGGLE OVER. NEED FOR BRIBES/PUNISHMENTS NEUTRALIZED.**

As long as we are bribing, punishing, or judging them- it’s hard for them to make the shift towards more autonomy and experience all the benefits that come along with that. As Jonson and Stixrud assert, “The brain develops according to its use... agency takes practice.” It only follows then that if we want the prefrontal cortex to develop the skills of goal setting, follow through, risk evaluation, emotional stability, and all the other amazing things it has the potential to do, we need to give it frequent and appropriate opportunities to practice during this developmental phase and that means more creating environments that are autonomy supportive. We aren’t suggesting that you turn over the reins and just let go, but rather that you carefully facilitate greater and greater levels of choice and responsibility as is appropriate for the young humans you are interacting with. Simply find ways to encourage them to ask, “what kind of person do I want to become and what do I need to do to get there?” instead of “what do I get or what happens to me if...”

And lastly, remember that moving toward these goals can be a gradual process. It’s OK if there are elements of extrinsic motivation in your family or classroom culture, the goal is to be cognizant and mindful of the effects of these methods and to use them judiciously. As adults, we are extrinsically motivated to do lots of things, and that’s OK!





# SUPPORTIVE AUTONOMY CHEAT SHEET

Here's a quick summary of ways you can implement this TODAY with any young human you interact with...

## DO THIS

### **Narrate why specific activities or habits are important or valuable**

This sounds like...

- "Memorizing math facts now is going to make it so much easier for you to reach your goal of becoming an engineer."

### **Allow children ample time to explore their interests and curiosities.**

This looks like...

- Letting them choose what they want to learn much of the time
- Making time for their questions
- Connecting them to new resources that can fuel their interests
- Facilitating real-life experiences that can expand their worldview

### **Set an example of finding enjoyment and satisfaction in educational pursuits**

This looks like...

- Mentioning how you spent your free time watching an interesting documentary or developing a talent
- Talking excitedly about something you have learned recently

### **Be honest about when something might not matter in the long run.**

This sounds like...

- "Why do we need to know this?"  
"I'm not sure, how do you see yourself using this information in the future?"

## ~~NOT THAT~~

### **Describe what will or will not happen for the child if they comply**

This sounds like...

- "Memorizing your math facts now means that you'll be able to come to our class pizza party next week."

### **Demand that all learning time be used to focus on planned material.**

This looks like...

- Proscribing what is learned
- Rushing past questions to stay on schedule
- Insisting that seat time is more valuable than real-life experience

### **Set an example of finding enjoyment only in entertaining or stimulating things**

This looks like...

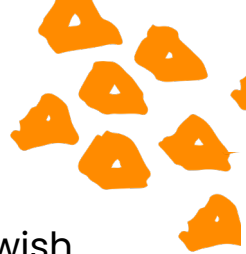
- Mentioning how boring you think learning is
- Treating all productive pursuits as unenjoyable work
- Modeling spending your free time playing games on scrolling social media on your phone

### **Inflating the importance of extrinsic rewards or punishments to motivate.**

This sounds like...

- "Why do we need to know this?"  
"It's on the test, if you don't memorize it you will fail."





## SUPPORTIVE AUTONOMY SELF-REFLECTION

When did you first start making big decisions in your life? Do you wish you had more practice and support earlier in your life? Did you feel prepared to make adult decisions when you were grown? How could you extend more trust and choice to the kids in your life today?

---

---

---

## SUPPORTIVE AUTONOMY AFFIRMATIONS

It takes a lot of time and intention to become the kind of adult who is able to offer supportive autonomy to young humans. Here are some new thoughts or affirmations that you can use to help you make this transition.

**"It's ok that they are "behind." Purpose is worth the wait"**

**"Kids have to have a NO to have a YES. Motivation cannot be separated from choice."**

**"Autonomy and choice breed responsibility and wisdom"**

**"I don't need to rely on bribes and punishments, I have more effective options"**

**"Disengagement is the hallmark of compulsion"**

**"Asking why is a sign of healthy engagement and the foundation of personal purpose"**



## SUPPORTIVE AUTONOMY RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

[The Self Driven Child](#) by William Stixrud and Ned Johnson

[Punished by Rewards](#) by Alfie Kohn

[Why We Do What We Do](#) by Edward Deci

## SUMMARY

Giving young people a shot at creating happy, successful, meaningful lives is dependent on whether or not we as adults are willing to do something different and start meeting their need for unconditional positive regard, persistent differentiation, and supportive autonomy. Instead of, “how can we motivate young humans more,” let’s start asking, “how can we create environments and relationships where young humans will have their needs met.” The results of ignoring these needs in our schools, homes, and communities are already apparent. Will we dare to do something different for the coming generation? For us at Prenda, our answer is YES.

## MORE ABOUT PRENDA AND THE KINDLED MOVEMENT

Prenda makes it easy for people like you to establish small learning communities based on these ideas. We provide a full K-8th curriculum built around our mission to empower learners. We are leading the movement towards empowered learning and making it easy for parents and educators to apply the principles that have been scientifically proven to help kids thrive. For more content, follow us on social @prendalearn, check out the KindLED resource hub at [prenda.com/kindled](https://prenda.com/kindled), subscribe to the KindLED podcast, and join the KindLED Collective on Facebook!

*This guide was written by Kaity Broadbent,  
Chief Empowerment Advocate at Prenda.  
You can follow Kaity on Twitter @KaityBroadbent.*