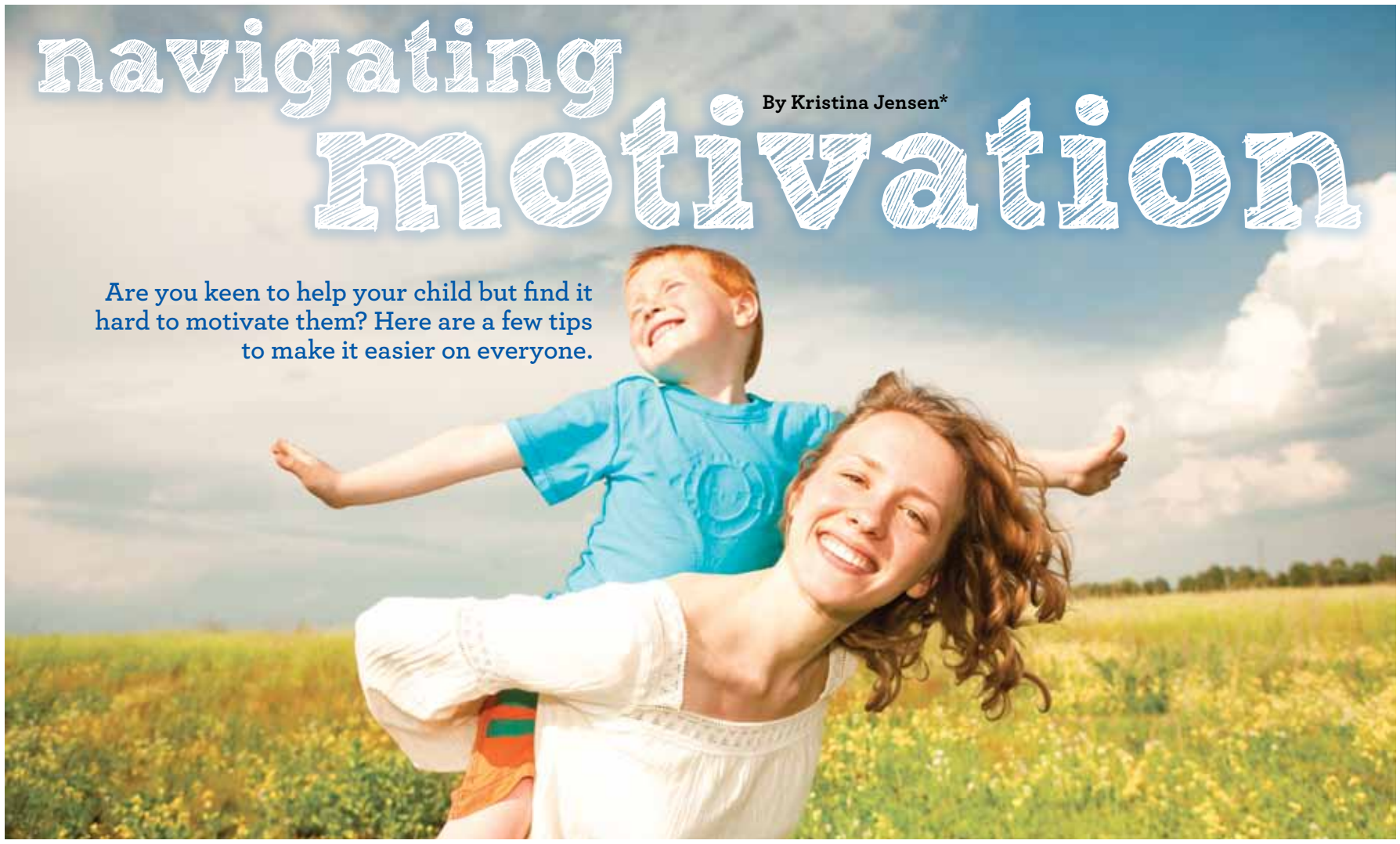
navigating motivation

By Kristina Jensen*



Are you keen to help your child but find it hard to motivate them? Here are a few tips to make it easier on everyone.

We parents all know how amazing it is to raise children but many of us often report feelings of frustration and despondency when trying to motivate our children to engage in learning activities with us. Or worse still, being afraid to even try because of the response we get.

Here are a few tips on dealing with this issue in the moment. It is always important to look at yourself and see where your control trips lie – control 'traps' in most case, and yes, we all have them. Much of the time, the problem lies in the perception of who has control and power, and the crucial breakthrough seems to be acknowledging this and taking steps to avoid it.

- **What the child learns is not necessarily the most important part.** It is how the child comes to that learning that is crucial. We forget sometimes that we had to learn these things too. As parents, we need to model life-long tools for learning, be it spelling, surfing, baking cookies or algebra. Take up a new and challenging subject yourself, say, Chinese. Share your learning difficulties with your child and ask them for help. This may be the precursor to them feeling comfortable to share more of their learning problems and successes with you.

- **Figuring out the right learning style(s) for your child is really important.** This means finding out the best way to present material to a child so that he or she is engaged and retaining information. It's no use trying to teach someone to read using visual cues when they are an audio or kinesthetic learner. They will probably do much better with a phonics-based program. (For information on individual learning styles, check out www.learning-styles-online.com/ overview and other helpful sites online.) Choosing something the child is interested in works really well. Then weave all the other disciplines into it – reading, writing, numbers, etc.

- **Take your time! This is very important.** As adults, we forget how long it took us to learn certain things, like reading and writing, and rushing your child can cause anxiety and resistance. Listen out for "I can't" and "I won't." They often mask a cry for help.

- **Rejoice in exploration.** Marvel at the way your child will take a resource and use it in entirely different ways to how it is 'supposed to be' or how you would do it. Learning is not a linear process. Engage in divergent thinking outside the box with your child.

- **Feelings are very important.** Taking time to ask "How are you feeling right now about learning in this particular situation?" and really hearing your child's response is a good place to start when things are not working. Remind yourself that connecting with your child is the main point. Staying connected with a child emotionally – that is, acknowledging and reflecting back to them their feelings and really showing them you are listening – is direct modeling of virtues such as empathy and compassion.

- **Put the child in charge of learning.** Role-reversal is a fantastically funny way to show your child how they are behaving and also to model something different. Let your child be the 'teacher' and you be the 'student'. The child's way of teaching could be very different to yours. It gives the child a sense of power and they will get to see things from the other side. It's also very empowering for your child to demonstrate their knowledge and what they have learned.

- **Playing around with emotions while you are in a learning situation is interesting too.** Try using an 'on/off' learning dial to help your child get in touch with how they feel about learning anywhere, anytime. The 'off' direction has a grumpy face and the 'on' direction has a happy face, with a packet pin arrow in between them that can be moved around depending on who wants to move it and how the situation is. While this may seem almost cruelly simplified in terms of all the complex emotions one child can have related to learning, children actually understand it and learn to use it as a tool very quickly. For example: "When I'm grumpy and switched off, I don't learn. I don't have fun. Mum or Dad doesn't have fun." One child I worked with added a 'tired' face to the clock for when he didn't have the ability to concentrate.

- **Admit mistakes and ask for help.** Many kids are so afraid of getting it wrong that they won't have a go. Show your child it's okay to make mistakes, and lead by example by asking for help or pretending you don't know. Let them teach you their way to solve a problem.

- **The value of trying harder.** The wonderfully helpful book, Mind Set by Carol Dweck, consistently affirms the power of positively encouraging children to try harder, to put more effort in. Some people do this quite naturally. It's part of their learning style. However, a bunch of us give up if we can't be good at something straight away. People who acknowledge that they need to practice more, have another go, try harder and don't just rely on talent, tend to be happier, healthier, more satisfied people overall.

Ultimately, this is child-led learning. This is a term which has gathered negative press in the past, however it doesn't mean simply letting your child rule the roost, or have everything their own way when it comes to learning situations. Instead, it means working co-operatively with your child and helping them to understand that they can create more of their own options when faced with challenges.

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