Creating Motivating Environments: Part II

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

In last month's article I described current research examining the concepts of success, achievement, ambition, and motivation. I emphasized that these concepts are relevant not only in our roles as parents, teachers, or other caregivers but also in the ways in which we conduct our adult lives. I offered illustrations of ambition gone amok at the expense of adhering to moral and ethical values, and success being defined very narrowly and short-sightedly in terms of the wealth we accrue, the size of our homes, or the colleges attended by our children.

I addressed questions about motivation and success and asked, "If we are to create what I call 'motivating environments,' that is, environments in which those involved are eager to participate and cooperate, what are some of the key features associated with the cultivation of motivation and accomplishment?" In this month's article I will explore attributes that are associated with success and also have an impact on motivation. In the third and final installment of this series next month, I will delve further into a theory of motivation that I have found very helpful in designing motivating environments that allow for and encourage different expressions of success and achievement but without losing sight of such moral and ethical values as honesty, respect, kindness, and compassion.

A View of Success

During the past several years I have become increasingly interested in and impressed by the work of Dr. Marshall Raskind, Director of Research and Special Projects at Schwab Learning in San Mateo, California and Director of Research at the Frostig Center in Pasadena, California. Raskind and his colleagues have articulated what they call "success attributes," those qualities that are most related to measures of success in one's adult life. While Raskind has focused on individuals with learning disabilities, his findings are relevant to all individuals. In this article I will review Raskind's definition of success and success attributes; if the reader wishes to gain a more in-depth understanding of his work, a number of his writings are posted on the Schwab Learning website (www.schwablearning.org).

Raskind declares, "Although views of success may differ, there appear to be number of things that most people include when they think of success. These are: good friends, positive family relations, being loved, self-approval, job satisfaction, physical and mental health, financial comfort, spiritual contentment, and an overall sense of meaning to one's life. Of course, different individuals may place lesser or greater emphasis on these varying components of success."

Raskind and his colleagues conducted a 20-year study of individuals with learning disabilities, attempting to define those factors that contributed to being successful or not. His study revealed six attributes that were associated with success. He cautions that not every successful individual with learning disabilities possesses each of these attributes and some attributes may be present to varying degrees; conversely, not every unsuccessful adult is devoid of these attributes. Rather, successful individuals are more likely to possess these attributes to a greater extent than those who are not as accomplished.

Very significantly, Raskind emphasizes, "It is our hope that by helping parents understand these success attributes (parenthetically, I might add teachers and other caregivers as well), they will be better prepared to work with and guide their children towards satisfying and rewarding lives. It is also important to keep in mind that having these attributes does not guarantee success. Rather it increases the chances of achieving a fulfilling and successful life. It is interesting to note that these characteristics may have a greater influence on success than such factors as academic achievement, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and even intelligent quotient (IQ)."

Raskind's observations have far-reaching implications. As we shall see, his notion of success attributes parallels in many ways the concept of a "resilient mindset" proposed by Sam Goldstein and myself as well as the concept of "emotional intelligence" advanced by Daniel Goleman. In addition, just as Sam and I have advocated that knowledge of the components of a resilient mindset can provide guideposts for adults in their quest to nurture resilience in children, Raskind recognizes that an understanding of success attributes will help parents to "be better prepared to work with and guide their children towards satisfying and rewarding lives."

The greater our understanding of the qualities associated with success, the greater the likelihood we can provide meaningful experiences to reinforce these qualities not only in our children but in ourselves as well. Very importantly, as we experience success we will become more confident and more motivated to confront future challenges, resulting in further success. Motivating environments are those in which there is both the promise and reality of accomplishment and achievement.

Success Attributes

The following are the six success attributes defined by Raskind and his colleagues, all of which are interrelated and contribute not only to success but to motivation as well:

Self-Awareness: Successful individuals were knowledgeable about both their strengths and vulnerabilities, not only in academic areas such as reading or math, but in non-academic domains as well. They were "open and specific" about their strengths and limitations and felt at ease discussing them. They used coping strategies that were productive rather than self-defeating. "They really came to a level of acceptance of their problems, their strengths, and their weaknesses, and were able to integrate those ideas and feelings into themselves." Raskind contends that this level of self-awareness permitted people to match their "strengths and weaknesses to the activities they pursued in their life," including their jobs.

Self-awareness is closely allied with Dr. Mel Levine's notion of de-mystification that I discussed in my last article. With de-mystification students learn about their learning style with the result that they feel more in control of the ways in which they process, retain, and apply information. De-mystification reinforces motivation and success.

Last month, I also expressed the view that all children have within them a receptivity to respond to the "right jolt" when it comes along, that is, an experience that stirs their interests and taps into a source of energy that might not have been previously apparent. The more we can assist youngsters to define their strengths and interests, while not avoiding their weaknesses, the more we can create a motivating environment that is filled with an abundance of "right jolts." If a child has difficulty reading but is gifted in art or carpentry, we should certainly provide resources to strengthen reading skills, but

we must not neglect to offer experiences that utilize and enhance the child's interests and "islands of competence." Enjoyment and success breed further enjoyment and success and a willingness to engage in difficult, demanding tasks.

Proactivity: A basic foundation of resilience is rooted in the belief that we are the authors of our own lives. We must help our children avoid a victim mentality. Raskind's definition of proactivity captures this sense of personal control. He observes, "What we refer to as proactivity has to do with being actively engaged in the world, politically, economically, and socially involved in community activities."

He continues, "And with this involvement came the idea that they could control their own destiny, that they could affect the outcome of their lives. They were active players in their own lives as opposed to many unsuccessful individuals who merely responded to events, were passive in their lives, and were more 'victims.' Successful individuals assumed responsibility for their actions and the outcomes of their actions." This observation resonates with the work of Carol Dweck, a psychologist I cited in last month's article. In discussing motivation, she states, "You have to teach students that they are in charge of their intellectual growth."

Proactivity, as defined by Raskind, embraces several salient features of a resilient mindset, including the presence of personal control, the importance of nurturing connections with others, and the benefits of engaging in activities that contribute to the welfare of one's community. Positive emotions, motivation, and a sense of well-being arise when people take responsibility for their actions and believe they are making a difference in the world. There are ample opportunities to involve children in such "contributory activities."

Perseverance: Successful individuals were those who did not immediately retreat from a task that was challenging. They did not readily give up. However, Raskind emphasizes that these individuals "demonstrate an additional important ability—knowing when to quit. Although they rarely give up on a general goal, depending on the situation, they may change the way they go about achieving it, thereby improving their chances of success. In other words, after repeated failure, these individuals are able to see and pursue alternative strategies for reaching a goal or know when the goal itself might have to be modified."

We must educate children to appreciate that mistakes and setbacks serve as opportunities for learning. We must prepare them for the occurrence of possible roadblocks to success and help them to adopt the attitude that if one approach is ineffective, a second or third approach may prove productive. We must also apply the same outlook to our own lives. Resilience will remain an illusive personal quality if we view mistakes as evidence that we are failures and incapable of change. Our motivation to engage in a task will be weakened when we believe that regardless of what we do, we will not succeed.

Goal-setting: Raskind and his colleagues found that successful people "set goals that are specific, yet flexible so that they can be changed to adjust to specific circumstances and situations." In addition, the goals of successful people are realistic and achievable and these individuals develop a plan for attaining these goals.

In our writings about resilience in both children and adults Sam Goldstein and I have highlighted the work of our friend and colleague Dr. Myrna Shure who developed the "I Can Problem Solve" program and authored *Raising a Thinking Child* and *Raising a Thinking Preteen.* Myrna's research offers ample evidence that the ability to identify a problem, consider different solutions, apply the solution that is judged most likely to succeed, and make modifications in the strategy as indicated, is essential if we are to deal effectively with challenges that confront us.

To emphasize the central role of problem-solving skills in our lives, I have often asked participants attending my workshops, "Have you ever faced a difficult situation in which your initial response was, 'I don't even know how to begin to deal with this problem'?" Almost all answer in the affirmative. I then ask them to consider how they would feel if they experienced this sense of being adrift without a compass with every problem that came their way.

One man answered with much insight, "It's difficult to imagine the fears that would occur if you did not even know where to begin to solve a problem, and did not have clear-cut goals and strategies. All I can think of is that it would be overwhelming and very scary."

In the absence of realistic goals and strategies for attaining these goals, success is unlikely to occur. It is therefore essential that in all environments we teach problem-solving and decision-making skills to our youth.

Presence and use of effective support systems: Raskind notes that this success attribute is related directly to the ability to establish goals. The individuals who supported successful individuals "also had set realistic and attainable goals for them. Both the successful and the unsuccessful individuals receive support from others. We saw that successful individuals eventually moved away from the support and they were able to decrease their dependence on others while that was not something that the unsuccessful individuals could do. Many of them had difficulty cutting that cord and remained highly dependent on others."

The late psychologist Julius Segal wrote that if youngsters are to become resilient they require the presence of "charismatic adults," adults from whom they can "gather strength." I would add that even as adults we need charismatic adults gracing our lives. However, the relationship is not a one-way street. As Raskind reminds us, "Successful individuals. . . actively seek the support of others. They don't simply wait for someone to come to their aid when they need assistance. Rather, they take the initiative to get help. Furthermore, they are willing to accept help when it is offered."

If children are to develop this perspective it is imperative that they interact with adults who not only reach out to them with support and care, but also encourage them to become active participants in the relationship, learning when and how to express their needs in a comfortable, realistic fashion.

Emotional coping strategies: Resilient individuals are not immune from experiencing frustration and stress. Rather, compared with people who are not resilient, they have developed coping strategies that permit them to effectively manage difficult situations. They do not rely on coping techniques that are counterproductive such as running from or avoiding problematic events.

Raskind observes that there are three components of successful emotional coping. They are: (a) awareness of the situations that trigger stress (e.g., speaking in public, taking a test, playing in a sport, confronting another person), (b) recognition of when stress is developing (e.g., increased anxiety, sweating, rapid breathing), and (c) access to

and use of adaptive coping strategies. The greater our repertoire of coping techniques, the easier it will be to "recruit" those strategies that will prove most fruitful in any given circumstance. Adults can assist children to develop a wide spectrum of coping techniques. Adults can also use these strategies in their own lives.

Individuals who take comfort in the knowledge that they have the resources available to cope with challenges will be more motivated to confront these challenges than those who do not feel equipped to manage difficult events.

Concluding Comments

The six success attributes that were identified by Raskind in his 20-year study of individuals with learning disabilities can serve as a blueprint for the ways in which we raise and educate all children and manage our own life journeys. They also offer guideposts for creating motivating environments in which cooperation, fun, perseverance, accomplishment, compassion, and personal control dominate the scene. In next month's article I will look more specifically at a framework for understanding the components of motivation and the significant link between these components and success attributes and moral and ethical values.

http://www.drrobertbrooks.com