CHAPTER 4

MOTIVATION

*Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.*
—William Butler Yeats

The most important component to achieving success is motivation. I’ve argued for years that if a person is motivated enough to succeed, we would have a very difficult time stopping them from doing so. The same is true in education. If a student wants to learn about something badly enough, a bad parent, teacher, and school combined could not stop them from learning it. This is why kids can memorize the words to entire songs, but can’t seem to remember a math formula they were taught five minutes ago. It’s the reason they can use critical thinking skills to
solve complex problems posed by a character in a video game, but can’t tap into that same skill to figure out what they’re supposed to do next in a math word problem. And it’s the reason why many boys with dreams of becoming professional athletes find the time to play basketball for hours each day, but not to do their algebra homework. The reason, for all of this, is that motivation matters most. If kids are struggling to learn something, most often it’s not that they can’t learn it, but that we just haven’t convinced them that it’s worth learning.

SWEET SPOTS

When discussing the importance of motivation, I like to relay the story of my daughter, Tiffany. Tiffany’s older brother, Kris, excelled academically, but she struggled in school and we were concerned that she might have some sort of learning disability. No matter how certain topics were taught to her, either at school or by us at home, she always seemed to need extra time to understand things. However, she always did well in any topic related to arts and crafts. By the time she entered middle school, the person we hired to tutor her, Lillian Leaberman, had quickly recognized Tiffany’s innate artistic talents and that she was a visual-kinetic learner. She helped Tiffany build a model house in a Middle Ages town and craft Elizabethan-era dolls by hand. Tiffany always had the biggest smile on her face whenever she was creating things, but I had never connected the passion she had for artistic pursuits with her average performance in the more traditional academic areas.
Tiffany went on to enter college as a psychology major. By then she had learned to channel her focus and did well. But during her sophomore year, a sorority sister came across some of Tiffany’s artwork and was blown away. “This is magnificent! You have a natural talent for art and design, why in the world are you wasting your time in psych?” she asked. The words hit Tiffany hard and before long she had left her major and decided to follow her passion for art, transferring to Otis-Parsons Design College and changing her major to fashion. After that there would be no more struggling, because she was doing what she loved to do and, as with any properly motivated student, success was not far behind.

I remember not long after Tiffany had started at Otis, she said to me, while flashing that same smile she had as a child as she crafted her dolls, “I spent fourteen years pushing the education ball up the hill, until I realized my natural gifts and my passion, and now I can finally chase the educational ball down the hill!” She went on to receive a special honor, winning the Thimble Award, one of the most coveted awards the school had to offer.

As a parent, what I’ve learned from these experiences with Tiffany is that parents and teachers all too often think that if a child is not succeeding academically, there must be something wrong with them. It turned out that the only learning disability Tiffany ever had in school was a lack of motivation. Once she recognized and began taking advantage of the “sweet spot” between her passions and talents, she was able to begin realizing her true potential.

My experiences with Tiffany cemented my belief that teaching children should be primarily about helping them discover their own natural genius, interests, and passions. I’ve found over the years that almost every child has what I call their sweet spot.