

Teaching kids how to set and attain their goals.

by Joanne Culley

Every year, on New Year's Day, my mother took time out from meal preparation to write down her resolutions for the year to come. She then taped them to her makeup mirror so she wouldn't forget. I don't remember exactly what her resolutions were, but what has stayed with me through the years was the example she set by continually raising the bar for herself. She encouraged my brothers and me to do the same and over the years I've tried to continue that tradition with my own children.

Making resolutions at New Year's is a good way to help children learn the importance of regularly setting goals for themselves and taking the steps necessary to achieve them.

Keep it positive

Many parents say they don't make resolutions for themselves and don't encourage their kids to do so. The reason: they have a hard time keeping their own resolutions and don't want to be in the position of nagging their children to keep theirs. These parents may be reluctant because they associate New Year's resolutions with giving up bad habits. For instance, they want to quit smoking or lose weight.

But what they should be doing is quite the opposite. We are more likely to stay with a goal that has been chosen positively, according to life coach Cora Whittington of Golden Pathways. "Always focus on what you want, not on what you don't want – imagine having a healthy body as opposed to losing weight. You are more likely to get there if you focus on the energy you will have to run faster."

Whittington has found that parents and kids are more likely to attain what they want by creating a picture of it. "The mind thinks in pictures, so it's important to create a picture of what you want. This visual method is quite appealing to kids. They can cut out a picture or create a collage of where they'd like to be. Parents can help them to visualize something that represents what they're after. For example, if they want to enjoy school more and have more friends, what would that look like? To imagine good friendships, they could look through magazines to search for a photo or draw a picture with several children having fun together. Children can keep their pictures in a treasure box, where they can add to it and remind themselves regularly of their goal."

Add a dash of encouragement

Resolutions can be personal or family-related. A child could make a personal resolution to learn a

new musical instrument or participate in a new sport. The parent could help her determine what steps to take to realize that goal, such as looking in the phone book to find a music teacher or calling a local recreation centre. It's important to discuss with your children the steps necessary to fulfill their goals, and encourage them to make a plan.

Young people are often motivated by altruistic goals. Perhaps a family resolution could be to be more environmentally friendly. You could brainstorm with your children about how to achieve that goal, such as saving trees by using both sides of the paper in your printer, making scratch pads from waste paper, and recycling what's left. You can build on trends, such as helping to reverse climate change by eating more local foods in order to reduce emissions associated with long-distance truck transportation.

Around holiday time, many families share the common goal of doing charitable work, says Maura Joy Lustig, artist and leadership coach with Starseed Consulting. As you are helping your kids set out the steps towards doing this, take the opportunity to discuss family values with them. "Having a strong inner sense of right and wrong is a good antidote to peer pressure and can help children avoid destructive activities."

Be sure to follow up

Both Whittington and Lustig agree goals need to be followed up. "You can ask children how they will know when they've attained their objective," says Lustig. Parents can help their children revisit the steps taken to ensure that the goal can be met. For instance, if the child's goal is to get better marks, parents can make sure he/she has spent extra time studying. "When their grades improve, they will feel better about themselves. Parents can build in a reward at the end, such as going out for milkshakes or going to the movies with friends," continues Lustig.

"It can be a thrilling learning experience for a young person when their resolution or goal comes to fruition," says Lustig, "especially when the goal is personally meaningful to them and they've had a burning desire to make it come true."

Help your kids lead more fulfilling lives with this contemporary spin on the time-honoured tradition of New Year's resolutions.

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