

# Not All Goals Are Created Equal: Helping Your Child Adopt and Achieve Goals

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A goal is something that a person wants to accomplish in the future. Goals are useful because they help channel our energies into things that are meaningful. In addition, having a goal gives a person reason to reflect on what has been accomplished in order to feel satisfaction. So, how do you help your adolescent set goals?

**Ask your adolescent what he or she *wants to accomplish*...** for summer reading? for social activities? for school clubs? for soccer? for learning a musical instrument? for grades in school? Thinking about what a person wants can be very powerful because it can point out the time spent on more versus less meaningful activities. In addition, you can learn something about your child. You (and your child too) might discover that his or her goal for soccer this season is to score a point for the team in two of the games.

Once you know what your child wants to achieve in general, encourage your child to **set a relatively specific goal that is attainable**. Rather than having a goal to “help animals” consider whether your child could volunteer once a week at the humane society. Specific goals are better than abstract goals because it is clearer how to reach them. In addition, make sure the goal is attainable. A goal that is too difficult is a failure before it gets started, so although your adolescent may have wonderfully lofty dreams, start small and work from there to accomplish them.

Encourage your child to set **a goal that is about doing the activity** itself (rather than the time spent at the activity). So, for example, rather than spending 45 minutes practicing piano, set a goal to learn a page of a song or to be able to play two lines without stopping. Goals that are about the activity will help your child focus on the task itself and get absorbed. Otherwise, attention can be divided between the activity and the clock, which can decrease enjoyment.

A goal is not motivating if it is unattainable, but it is also not motivating if you don’t know when you’ve reached it. Therefore, encourage your child to set goals that can be **evaluated for progress** or lack of progress. A goal is meaningless if you can’t judge when progress is made or when it has been reached. In addition, a goal that is hard to evaluate for progress lacks that extra bonus feeling of satisfaction once it is achieved. If you know the goals that your child sets, you can help point out the progress and promote feelings of accomplishment.

Finally, goals lead to the most satisfaction if they are **tied to personal values**. Help your child find the connections between his or her goals and the things that really matter (caring for the environment, being a good big brother/sister, being kind to animals, not being lazy). Look out—your child might want to know what your goals are too!