

Goal-Setting

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WHAT IS A GOAL? Although the dictionary defines a goal as “the end toward which effort is directed,” we prefer to speak of goals as things we set for ourselves in terms of our performance or behavior. That is, what are we trying to accomplish?

WHY DO WE SET GOALS? There are several reasons for setting goals. First, a goal gives us some idea of what we are trying to accomplish. It gives us a way of knowing whether we should be working harder, playing more, trying a different approach, etc. Setting goals helps motivate us and gives us a way of deciding when we should reinforce ourselves or pat ourselves on the back. It helps us set priorities, knowing what we should focus our efforts and attention on. It also helps us communicate and work better with others; when goals are clear, everyone has a better understanding of what is to be done and how each person is involved.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD GOAL? A good goal is a goal which is specific, one which we can actually measure (usually by counting). It helps for the goal to be as clear as possible; something which everyone would readily agree is achieved once the goal is met. The goal, therefore, should state what is to be accomplished and in what time frame (e.g., “I want to finish this book by Saturday morning”). A good goal is one which challenges us to do our best and perhaps learn new things in order to meet the goal, but is not so hard as to be impossible or discourage us.

HOW DO WE SET GOALS? Setting goals is hard, something most adults have trouble doing. First, we should think about things which are important to us, things we are trying to accomplish. It does not make sense to set goals for unimportant things or to try and set goals for everything. (We do not, for example, want to set goals for the number of doors we walk through or clouds we see.) Second, we should use our past performance as a guide for establishing the goal. If possible, check with someone as to whether the goal seems reasonable. Be fair – do not make the goal too hard or too easy. You can use the performance of others to guide your decision, but remember that these are your own personal goals and should fit your interests and abilities. Put the goal down in writing, have a way of keeping track as you are moving toward the goal (a graph, a chart, etc.) Make an agreement with yourself about what will happen when you meet your goal, how you will celebrate (hopefully!) or how you will “discipline” yourself (e.g., “I want to finish balancing my checkbook before watching the Bill Cosby Show; if not, I’ll keep working and miss the show”). Remember, start with simple goals and short time frames since you want to get practice at setting goals.

WHAT SHOULD WE AVOID IN SETTING GOALS? Don’t let others set goals for

you without being involved. You should know what the goals are and agree that they are fair. Don't rely upon what others do to set your goal, and most importantly, don't set goals which have too many parts, or will not work. Set short-term goals (the day or week) and if you need to, break the goal into smaller parts. Instead of cleaning the room by Friday, break the goal into smaller parts and consider cleaning under the bed by Monday night, the closet by Tuesday, etc. Be careful about vague goals such as, "I'm going to do better in school" and think more about specific goals. Goals which refer to effort (e.g., "I am going to work 15 minutes each night on spelling") are just as important as ones which look at performance only ("I am going to get a score of 90 on the next spelling test").

WHAT DO GOALS HAVE TO DO WITH SELF-CONTROL? Goals help us to motivate ourselves and give us a way to use self-talk, negotiation, self-reinforcement, etc. Goal-setting requires that we be more knowledgeable about ourselves and what we are trying to do; absolutely essential to self-control. Also, goal-setting requires a constant evaluation of our performance and asks us to decide whether our goals are reasonable and whether they need to be changed. If we can talk with people in terms of their goals and ours, we can become more responsible and in control of our own behavior. It also helps us problem-solve and brainstorm solutions to our problems.

HOW CAN PARENTS HELP? Parents can help by being a good model for goal-setting. They should have goals which are clear to the children, measurable, recorded, have consequences, etc.; not goals for the children, but goals for the parents. Parents can begin to talk in terms of what the goal is, is it reasonable, how can it be helpful, etc. Parents can "think out loud" in terms of setting the goal, changing the goal, evaluating their performance, etc. Every parent should be able to write at least five goals for themselves in the areas of parenting, employment, leisure, health and personal relationships, which can be shared with their children. When they speak of the group, they can speak in terms of the goal of the activity, and how the group knew if they met their goal.