



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Helping Children Set and Meet Goals

The following is a question that we answered about helping school age children to set goals. We hope that our response to this family is also of use to other parents.

Q. Our family has a tradition of New Year's resolutions that we take seriously. Any ideas about how we can introduce our 7 year old son Henry to the idea of setting goals?

A. Henry is at a good age to begin setting goals. The ability to set goals and follow through successfully is a most valuable life skill. Let's think through your question.

Why is setting goals a good idea?: Clearly, the capacities to establish and meet goals are important life skills. The ability to achieve goals enables us to live the kind of life that we desire while providing confidence that we are capable and strong. In other words, the ability to set and achieve goals supports healthy self-esteem.

The 90 percent rule: Children thrive on success and are demoralized by failure. A negative experience will often have much more impact than a positive experience. For example, many children tell their parents about an episode of unhappiness or frustration in their school day as if the enjoyable and successful experiences have been outweighed by the negative experiences. Grown-ups do the same — a day filled with successes can be ruined by a problem. Of course children need to learn about managing failures, but too many failures weigh a child down rather than provide an opportunity to rise above failure.

With this in mind, the Lucy Daniels Center recommends its "90 percent rule": Present a challenge to your child only if you are at least 90 percent sure that your child will succeed. Of course, don't take the 90 percent figure too literally; it is just a shorthand way of saying that parents need to protect children from excessive failures.

The implication of the 90 percent rule for goal-setting is that you should help Henry set a goal that you believe he can achieve. Here's an example:

Perhaps Henry becomes upset when he cannot find his favorite toy truck because it is buried among his other possessions. If the goal is simply that he will put away his trucks, the likelihood that he will achieve this goal (every day!) is much less than 90 percent, to say the least. Some days he might straighten them up, but there is a very good chance that he will only do this occasionally. Each of your reminders will be a reminder of failure, since Henry's goal is to always keep his trucks put away where he can find them.

However, if Henry's goal is to put his trucks where they belong once a week, then you can gently remind him as the end of the week approaches. Your reminders will serve to help him achieve the weekly goal, rather than a reminder of failure.

In a few years, Henry should be able to take more responsibility without reminders. As he is taking the first steps, gentle transitions from your "doing for him" to your "doing with him" will enable him ultimately to "do without you."

The role of activity in mastery: Children feel capable and strong when they participate appropriately in the activities and decisions in their lives. Therefore, encourage Henry to establish his own goals. You may find it challenging to find goals that matter to Henry, because it is likely he is not inspired by many of the goals that you might choose for him. If Henry cannot come up with any goals, you might suggest some based on your own understanding of what matters to him. Be sure to differentiate your own wishes or expectations and Henry's wishes for himself.

For example, clearing the table after meals or being kind to his sister might

be heartfelt desires of yours, but, unless Henry is a very unusual lad, he is unlikely to completely share your dedication to those goals! You can continue to expect Henry to clear his dishes and treat his sister well, but you are seeking Henry's compliance with your desires. This is entirely different than helping Henry find a way to accomplish his own wishes.

Achieving the goal: Henry will need your help to make a plan for success. Suppose Henry really does want to always be able to find his trucks, and you and he set a goal of putting them in their place weekly. Ask him whether he would like you to remind him from time to time. Help Henry think about when he will do the task, and help him break the task down into subtasks. For example, you might help him make a plan where he first searches in one part of the family room, then another part, then under his bed and so on. Perhaps you might make a chart that he can follow. Use your imagination and creativity.

The reward for achieving goals: Because Henry wishes to achieve his goals, the reward for success is straightforward: the satisfaction and good feeling called pride. Henry will be motivated to continue to seek out that good internal feeling. Of course you will be proud of Henry, and your smiles and hugs will go a long way to reinforce Henry's own good feeling.

Lucy Daniels Center recommends against providing a prize for his success in meeting the goal. In our view, providing a "reward" runs the risk of diminishing the real reward — the inner feeling of pride — and replacing it with something less valuable. Children grow in self-esteem when achievement is its own reward, rather than the means to a prize. There is a time and place for judicious use of rewards and behavioral charts, such as when you are trying to provide an incentive for Henry to comply with your expectations.

Setting and achieving goals is work, but it should also be fun. We hope that Henry's New Year's resolution brings him pride and satisfaction for a job well done.

