



Mott Poll Report

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Resolving to be Involved: Goal-Setting for Parents and Kids

Many parents and children find it helpful to set goals to motivate themselves to improve or to achieve something. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 0-18 about setting goals related to parenting, and about how they support goal-setting among children age 11-18.

Most parents (71%) report they make resolutions or set personal goals, including at New Year's (25%), at the start of the school year (9%), and on one's birthday (8%). Nearly half of mothers (47%) and one-third of fathers (35%) say they have made goals to change something about their parenting. Among those who have set parenting goals, 74% feel it has helped make them a better parent and 85% believe that it has helped their child learn how to work toward a goal.

Parents who have made goals related to parenting strive to have more patience (78%), spend less time on their phone (56%), and be more consistent with discipline (47%). Parents also set health-related goals, such as to get healthier for their child (52%), provide healthier meals/snacks (48%), and exercise with their child (37%). Some parents make goals related to their child's connection to the broader community, such as involving their child in more spiritual activities (34%) and being more involved at their child's school (21%). More mothers than fathers set goals to exercise with their child (41% vs 30%) and provide healthier meals/snacks (55% vs 38%). Parents with three or more children are more likely to set goals to be consistent with discipline and involve their children in spiritual activities, compared to parents with fewer children.

Over half of parents (53%) say their child 11-18 years has set personal goals. Child goals relate to grades/school performance (68%), succeeding at an activity (52%), exercise (43%), earning money (40%), eating habits/nutrition (40%), trying something new (39%), friendship (23%), and/or volunteering (20%). According to parents, teens 15-18 years are more likely to set goals related to eating/nutrition and exercise, while children 11-14 years are more likely to set a goal to try something new. Parents say they support their child's goal-setting by celebrating their attempt at improving (70%), joining their child in working toward the goal (58%), helping their child keep track of progress (52%), providing financial support (51%), and offering a reward for achieving the goal (44%).

Supporting kids' goal-setting

% of parents of kids 11-18 who support their child's goals in the following ways

Celebrate attempts at improvement 70%

Join their efforts 58%

Help track progress 52%

Provide financial support 51%

Offer reward for achieving goal 44%



Report Highlights

1 in 2 mothers and 1 in 3 fathers have set goals to improve their parenting.

The top parenting goal is to have more patience.

3 in 4 parents say setting goals has helped them improve their parenting.

Over half of parents say their kids age 11-18 set personal goals.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in August 2023 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,044). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 62% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 6 percentage points.

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Implications

Milestone occasions, such as birthdays and the start of a new calendar or school year, present opportunities for self-reflection and a chance to push the reset button and attempt a new start. This Mott Poll indicates that such moments often lead to parents making resolutions or setting goals, as they focus on areas of their parenting that they want to change. Most parents felt that goal-setting has improved their parenting.

Parents identified several areas where they want to improve their parenting approach, including being more engaged, focusing on their own and their child's health, and supporting their child's connection to their community. Parents can use specific strategies to enhance their ability to achieve their goal. Some changes can be facilitated through scheduling, such as setting specific times to exercise or volunteer at school, or using tools like productivity apps to schedule "breaks" from cell phones and other digital devices. Teaming up with another parent who has a similar goal can enhance accountability for maintaining that exercise or volunteer schedule. Parents also can enlist their children for help with sticking to resolutions. For example, school-age children can help pick out healthy snacks for the family's grocery list.

Journaling can be a useful strategy for parenting goals that require more reflection and insight, such as being more consistent with discipline and having more patience. Parents record what is most important and valued, and then explore how well their current approach fits with those values – including situations that test the parent's patience. This type of reflection can provide motivation to make improvements.

It is well known that most people who set goals do not actually achieve them, and many New Year's resolutions are forgotten rapidly. Setting a specific and realistic target is essential for sticking to a resolution. For example, "volunteer at school once a month" provides a clearer path to action than "be more involved at school."

In in this Mott Pott, parents felt their own goal-setting helped their child learn how to work toward a goal. When children express interest in making resolutions or setting goals, parents can apply the lessons they have learned. A key step is helping children move from a general idea ("exercise more") to a specific target ("exercise three times a week"). For younger children, the goals should be fairly short-term. A child who resolves to try a new activity may benefit from talking with parents about the schedule, cost, and level of commitment required for potential activities, so that they choose an option that will fit with the family's schedule and resources.

Parents described a variety of ways to support their child's goal-setting. Some parents offer rewards, which can be a meaningful way for parents to show their support for their child taking on a challenge. However, parents should be clear about what they are rewarding. If a child resolves to lose weight by exercising more regularly, parents will want to emphasize that the reward is for the consistent engagement in exercise, rather than a specific amount of weight loss. When the goal is to try something new, parents can help reward the child's gumption to take on an unfamiliar challenge, regardless of whether it becomes a long-term interest.

Some strategies to support a child's goal-setting require a greater level of parent involvement, such as joining the effort or helping the child track progress. Parents should make sure the child welcomes this level of involvement. An overly enthusiastic parent may take on the responsibility for arranging and tracking activities, which undercuts the child's opportunity to learn from and accomplish their goal.

Children may set goals related to achievement that is not completely within their control – earning a certain grade or test score, being selected for a team or role. It's exciting for both parents and children when they succeed with this type of goal, and heartbreaking when a child's best effort falls short. It's helpful for parents to talk with their child about what they learned, focusing on what was most effective and emphasizing the child's growth and improvement. Parents can point out that being able to set and work toward a goal will be a useful skill throughout life, so the child takes pride in the effort as much as the result.