

To Engage or Not to Engage?

By Sarah Roehl

September ushers in the first full month of the school year. Student engagement and motivation are likely hot topics of conversation as educators approach the inevitable question: *How do we get kids to learn and maybe even enjoy it—or, at the very least, turn in their work?* Let's consider the following classroom scenario: A student spent several hours a day this summer playing Roblox and watching videos on YouTube. She has a hard time falling asleep and wakes up feeling exhausted. This student started her fifth-grade year of school this week. Historically, school never felt particularly challenging to her. This year, however, her teacher notices that she is distracted, irritable, and almost apathetic. Sound familiar?

It's easy to assume the student in the above scenario is being lazy or is simply uninterested in school but you need a wider lens to see the full picture. Gaming and social media are designed to capture and maintain our attention. Dr. Anna Lembke, a professor of psychiatry and addiction medicine at Stanford, identified three characteristics that can make a behavior particularly reinforcing: **accessibility, potency, and novelty**. When something is easy to access, provides a strong or immediate reward, and continually offers something new; it can become especially compelling.

Dopamine is a key player in motivating behavior. Dr. Masud Husain, Professor of Neurology and Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Oxford, explains that dopamine plays several important roles in the brain and body, including functions related to movement, memory, learning, and motivation. Contrary to my past understanding, dopamine isn't simply the brain's "pleasure chemical." It's the *driver* that anticipates pleasure, learns from experiences, and determines whether an action is worth the effort. Dr. Husain describes each person as operating with a baseline level of dopamine, which can spike or drop in response to a stimulus. Ideally, our baseline isn't too low or too high. **When someone experiences too much dopamine, too often; it lowers their baseline dopamine level over time—requiring intense stimuli more often, just to feel "normal."** This makes sense when you consider the reward and reinforcement cycle of any behavioral habit.

The traditional learning environment often requires students to sustain attention for extended periods of time, work through tasks that may not feel valuable or interesting, tolerate frustration, and delay gratification. Those are important skills, but challenging when you've become accustomed to personalized content and instantaneous rewards. This doesn't mean every distracted student is spending too much time on YouTube. Sleep, anxiety, ADHD, depression, family circumstances, academic challenges, social relationships, substance use, and countless other factors influence a student's ability to focus and engage. The goal isn't to diagnose the cause but to stay curious about what might be underneath the behavior.

Students can rebuild and strengthen their capacity for attention, persistence, frustration tolerance, and delayed gratification. Rather than asking how to get kids to engage, maybe the better question is *what conditions make meaningful engagement possible?*
—Build a classroom where students know what to expect and feel safe enough to take risks.

- Incorporate the appropriate number of bells and whistles without making constant stimulation the norm.
- Celebrate effort, persistence, and growth—not just correct answers.
- Model how to transition from highly stimulating activities to calmer learning activities.
- Break complex tasks into manageable chunks and help students experience progress along the way.
- Resist the temptation to interpret disengagement as a character flaw.
- Provide **meaningful human connection**—something technology can never fully replace.

September also provides important opportunities to raise awareness and increase understanding of mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) recovery. SAMHSA reported that approximately 44 million Americans lived with a diagnosed substance use disorder in 2025. I'm part of that statistic, and I'm incredibly grateful for the support of the recovery community. Unfortunately, many people living with a SUD do not receive treatment or support. Fear of negative social judgment remains one barrier to seeking help. Thank you for working alongside us to decrease stigma, enhance prevention efforts, and increase access to youth substance use/mental health services across Nebraska. —Sarah

Resources:

Huberman, A. (Host). (2026, August 24). *How to improve motivation & overcome procrastination with Dr. Masud Husain* [Audio podcast episode]. Huberman Lab. <https://www.hubermanlab.com/episode/how-to-improve-motivation-and-overcome-procrastination-masud-husain>

Robbins, M. (Host). (2026, January 22). *The science of self-control: Find motivation, increase your focus, and hack dopamine* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4rTyhYfZhE>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2026). *2021–2025 NSDUH companion infographic report*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt57151/2025-nsduh-companion-report.pdf>