

# Helping Kids Change Their Own Behavior

The Helper's Guide  
to the  
MotivAider<sup>®</sup> Method

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## Introduction

### How the MotivAider Method Works

The purpose of the MotivAider Method is to enable children to make desired changes in their own behavior. The method revolves around the use of a simple electronic device called the MotivAider® that automatically provides children with private reminders to engage in desired behavior.

To make a particular behavioral change, a child's attention must be focused on the required behavior and the benefits of engaging in it. The child must, in other words, be actively aware of what to do and why to do it.

Children are rarely able on their own to stay focused enough on making a particular change to actually make that change quickly and efficiently. They get easily distracted and their good intentions get lost in the shuffle.

The MotivAider helps children make a desired change by making certain that they will stay focused on making that change. The device keeps children focused by automatically and repeatedly exposing them to private cues or prompts that remind and urge them to make the desired change.

The prompt is a vibration signal that's designed to capture the child's attention and privately convey a personal message that's been associated in the child's mind with that signal.

The personal message, which is devised by the helper and/or the child, can be a special word, phrase or image that reminds and urges the child to make the desired change.

By associating her personal message with the MotivAider's vibration signal, the child causes the vibration signal to convey her personal message in the same way that a ringing telephone conveys the message, "Someone is calling." The child, in other words, automatically *thinks* the message whenever she *feels* the vibration. And because the child can (1) assign virtually any personal message to the MotivAider's

signal and (2) automatically receive that message as often as desired, the MotivAider makes it possible for the child to get enough of the right reminders to achieve maximum benefit.

## **Benefits of the MotivAider Method**

**Ownership.** Because children typically experience the MotivAider's reminders as their own, the MotivAider's reminders are less likely to prompt the kind of resistance children commonly show when they feel nagged by parents or teachers. What's more, children typically enjoy a boost in self-esteem when they make changes with the MotivAider because they feel personally responsible for the success they achieve.

**Consistency.** With the MotivAider, the child receives helpful reminders *consistently* - not just when helpers remember to give them or when the child is already off-track.

**Privacy.** Because the MotivAider works privately, it prevents a child from suffering the public relations damage that can be done when others are repeatedly exposed to a helper's attempts to correct the child's behavior.

## **When to Use the MotivAider**

The MotivAider helps children change their own behavior so they can accomplish what they themselves want to accomplish. It is not intended to promote changes that children themselves truly have no desire to make.

In order for the MotivAider to be effective, the child must (1) have a clear picture of the change he wants to make, (2) be physically and mentally capable of engaging in the desired new behavior, and (3) be able to anticipate a compelling personal benefit of making the change.

The best indication that a child will benefit from using the MotivAider is evidence that the child responds favorably to reminders given by teachers, parents or others.

## Overview of the MotivAider Method

- STEP 1. **Set a goal.** Set a realistic behavioral goal - one that is tied to a benefit that readily appeals to the child.
- STEP 2. **Determine an action.** Identify what the child will have to do, think or feel in order to achieve the goal.
- STEP 3. **Devise a personal message.** Help the child select a word, phrase, short sentence or image that will remind and urge her to take the action.
- STEP 4. **Connect the message to the vibration signal.** Help the child associate or pair the message with the vibration so that he will automatically think the message whenever he feels the vibration.
- STEP 5. **Select a time interval.** Decide how often to have the MotivAider send the child signals.
- STEP 6. **Establish a MotivAider use routine.** Decide when and where the child should use the MotivAider, and build in prompts and checks to make sure that she is using the MotivAider properly.
- STEP 7. **Monitor and adjust.** Monitor results and, if necessary, change, for example, how often the vibration signals are sent or reword the child's personal message to achieve the best possible results.
- STEP 8. **Phase out.** Once the child is engaging in the desired behavior, begin gradually phasing out the MotivAider by sending signals less often and/or by having the child use the MotivAider less often.

## Operating the MotivAider

The purpose of this guide is to convey the basics of the MotivAider Method for changing children's behavior. *The Helper's Guide* is not intended to replace the operating instructions that accompany MotivAiders.

The MotivAider has been continuously improved since its introduction in the 1980s. Its operating capabilities, special features and customization options therefore vary by model.

If you no longer have the operating instructions that came with the MotivAider, you can view or download instructions at <http://support.motivaider.com>.

## The Helper's Influence

The quality of the relationship between helper and child can be an important factor in determining how the child experiences the MotivAider. The MotivAider works best when the child views the helper as an ally who has a genuine interest in the child's well-being.

## How to Present the MotivAider

The goal of presenting the MotivAider to a child is to have him experience the device as a highly personal tool that will help him achieve something he wants to achieve.

Here are some tips on how to present the MotivAider:

- If possible, the MotivAider should be presented by a helper who the child is most eager to please.
- Present the MotivAider as an invention that is designed to help the child achieve the particular type of goal she wants to achieve. For example, "This invention helps remind kids to speak in a soft voice."

- Use positive language that is relevant to the child's level of development, experience and interests. Whenever possible, use analogies or metaphors that explain - in terms that appeal to the child - what the MotivAider does and how it does it. For example, for a boy who is an avid baseball fan, the MotivAider can be presented as being "Just like having your own personal coach. Imagine having [the child's favorite coach or player] with you all the time to remind you to [the child's action] so you can [the child's benefit]."
- Discuss the desired behavioral change in a way that highlights the benefits the child - not the helper - will enjoy once the change has been made. To do this well, you must know what's important to the child - what she wants, fears, likes and dislikes. For example, "The MotivAider will make sure you don't forget to go to the bathroom so you won't have to worry any more about having those embarrassing accidents."
- Get the child's agreement that it will be a great help to have a personal tool - a buddy - with him that will keep reminding him to make the desired change.
- Emphasize the MotivAider's privacy by making comments such as, "No one else will know how it's helping you." Encourage the child to experience the device as almost magical and extremely personal by making comments like, "See how all of it sudden it jiggles just to remind you."
- Show the child how the MotivAider works. When it vibrates, say something like, "Isn't that neat? When it jiggles like that it will automatically remind you to [the child's action] so that you can [the child's goal/benefit]."

- Show the child how she can wear or carry the MotivAider. Note that the device can be carried in the child's pocket or clipped to a belt or waistband. It can be worn face out like a beeper or - for greater privacy - face in, that is, with the face against the child's body.

## The Method Steps In Depth

### Step 1. Setting a Goal

It's best to start with a goal that's relatively easy for the child to achieve and that's most likely to result in a quick and generous pay-off. Initial success with the MotivAider will help the child build confidence and momentum that should help him tackle more ambitious goals.

Consider breaking a desired change into a number of smaller intermediate steps. For example, if your ultimate goal for a hyperactive child is to have her pay attention better in school, you might scale the goal down by either focusing first on paying attention better just during math, or aim first for just making sure that the child remains in her seat.

In discussing goals with the child, always emphasize the most appealing, earliest benefits the child will experience when a goal is achieved. Remember to focus on benefits from the child's point of view - not from yours. For example, the goal of helping Emma reduce the number of errors she makes on worksheets was presented to her as, "Do better on the worksheets you do in class so that you'll have less homework and more time to play."

### Step 2. Determining an Action

An action is simply what the child must do or think in order to achieve a given goal. It's what the MotivAider's vibration reminds the child to do.

When actions involve immediate, tangible behavior that an observer can readily see, it's easy to tell how well the MotivAider is working. Although obviously harder to monitor, private actions - such as having a child think a specific thought or affirmation (such as, "I can do it!"), or even conjuring up a specific picture or image (for example, shaking

hands with a movie star or athlete the child idolizes) can also be extremely effective.

**Self-Monitoring** is a type of action that deserves special mention. Especially with children who are highly motivated to make desired changes in their behavior, having them simply make a point of noticing whether they are engaging in the desired behavior can promote change. Whenever they feel the MotivAider's vibration, children with attention problems, for example, can be prompted to check whether they're on-task.

It may help to make self-monitoring a more concrete and observable action. For example, whenever Devan feels the MotivAider's vibration, he takes the action of making a mark on a simple score sheet to indicate whether he's on-task.

When devising actions, keep these points in mind:

- Make sure the child is truly capable of performing the action. Steer clear of actions you're not really sure the child can perform.
- Make sure you have enough information to know that carrying out the action will indeed enable the child to achieve his goal. To illustrate, Samantha had a problem with incontinence in school. Her teacher initially chose the action, "Check your bladder to see if you have to go." When accidents persisted despite the fact that Samantha was consistently reminded to check for bladder tension, the teacher backtracked and got more information from Samantha's family. She discovered that Samantha had a medical problem that prevented her from feeling bladder tension even when her bladder was full. Once the action was changed to simply "Go to the bathroom," Samantha stopped having accidents.
- Favor actions that tell the child what to do over those that tell him what not to do. Children usually do better at carrying out DO actions than DON'T actions.

"Pay attention to the teacher when she's speaking," for example, is likely to be more effective than "Don't pay attention to your classmates." "Keep your feet flat on the floor" is better than "Don't kick." "Sit up straight" is better than "Don't slouch." "Stay in your seat" is a better action than "Don't get up."

- Favor actions that are likely to lead to rewarding, self-perpetuating results. For example, an action that causes others to respond more favorably to a child can instigate a benevolent cycle. To illustrate, when Tyler, a decidedly unpopular boy, began taking the action of paying his peers compliments, his peers started to include him more. The opportunity for more interaction with his peers, in turn, enabled him to improve the range and quality of his social skills. When Shareese took the action of being more polite in her interactions with her mother, her mother responded with greater warmth, which in turn caused Shareese to exhibit fewer symptoms of emotional insecurity.

### **Step 3. Devising a Message**

The purpose of a personal message is to remind and urge a child to take his action.

There's lots of room for skill and creativity when devising messages.

A message can be a word, a phrase, a brief sentence or even an image that needs to be meaningful only to the child. The message can concentrate on reminding a child what to do, why to do it, or both.

Think first about what kind of help the child needs. For example, Emily was not in the least bit reluctant to breathe through her nose whenever she was reminded to do so. She was already motivated. All she needed was to be reminded of what to do. So, all it took was the simple message, "Breathe through your nose" to get Emily to breathe properly.

The message, "Mrs. Smith will be so proud of me," was used to motivate a shy and extremely soft-spoken girl to speak up. Although Grace was very aware of the importance of speaking up, she was also unable on her own to overcome her uneasiness about doing so. So her teacher decided that the most important job a message could do for Grace is to remind her of a motivating reason to go ahead and speak up despite her uneasiness.

"The early bird gets the worm" is the message that helped Matthew develop the habit of starting his work sooner. The message called his attention to both the action (get started early) and a benefit (the worm, which for Matthew, stood for having more time to play his favorite sport after school).

The more resistant a child is to taking a given action, the more motivating the message must be, i.e., the more it needs to focus his attention on a compelling reason to take the required action. This was the case for Jack, an athletic fourth-grader whose academic performance was being hampered by his tendency to talk to other kids when he should be concentrating on doing his own work. His teacher realized that a message like "Do my own work" probably wouldn't do the trick. So she and Jack came up with the message, "baseball glove," a message that reminded Jack that his parents had promised to buy him a new baseball glove as soon as his grades improved. "Baseball glove" focused Jack's attention on an appealing reason to get back to work despite the fun he was having visiting with the other kids.

Messages that enable a child to conjure up a vivid image can be very effective. For example, Carla, a peanut-butter loving third grader whose rate of speech approached the speed of light, got much better results with the message, "Imagine eating peanut butter," than she did with the message, "Slow down."

Many effective messages are based on metaphors. A metaphor can be used to build a bridge that allows certain skills and/or positive feelings a child has in one area to cross over to another area where those positives are initially lacking.

For example, Daniel, an avid hockey player whose attention wandered in school, was reminded to "Tend the net" in class. Jessica, a sixth-grader who wants to be a commercial pilot when she grows up, used the message, "Full throttle," to work on overcoming her reluctance to invest herself fully in her work. And Andrew, a fourth grader whose inattentiveness to his surroundings caused lots of problems, used the message, "Look for clues," (Andrew loves detective stories!) to dramatically improve his attention.

## **Step 4. Attaching the Message to the Vibration Signal**

The goal of this important step is to cause the child to automatically *think* her personal message whenever she *feels* the MotivAider's vibration.

- Tell the child that whenever he feels the MotivAider vibrate (jiggle), it will remind him to think [his personal message].
- With the switch at SET, press the small oval Advance Function Key, and while the MotivAider is vibrating, let the child hold the MotivAider against his body while you model what the child should be thinking: "Whenever I feel the MotivAider jiggle, I think [the child's personal message]. I feel it jiggling, so I'm thinking [his message]."
- Move the slide switch back to SET to stop the vibration. Now repeat again two or three times while prompting the child to recite the message herself.

Suggest that the child make a point of saying the message to himself the first few times he feels the vibration each day. After a while, the child will automatically think the message whenever he feels the vibration.

## Step 5. Selecting a Time Interval

By controlling how often the MotivAider vibrates, you can control how often the child's personal message will pass through his mind.

The time interval you set determines the amount of time that will pass between signals - the shorter the interval, the more often the MotivAider will vibrate.

There are no hard and fast rules about how to choose the right interval. If you don't even have enough of a basis to make an educated guess, don't worry. Just start with an interval of ten or fifteen minutes.

It's generally better to err on the side of sending signals too seldom than too often. Once you're sure that (1) the child is usually thinking the message whenever she feels the vibration and (2) she is usually taking the required action whenever she thinks the message, you can try shortening the interval slightly if there's still room for improvement.

## Step 6. Establishing a MotivAider Use Routine

It's rarely necessary or practical for children to use the MotivAider continuously. Although there are no hard and fast rules about when and where the device should be used, it's important to establish a use routine for each child. The use routine may be shaped by the nature of the behavior the MotivAider is being used to address, the child's preferences and aversions, and various logistical factors (such as the availability of MotivAiders).

Here are some guidelines for developing a MotivAider use routine:

- To promote *carryover*, use soon after learning or formally practicing a new skill. For example, Anne used the MotivAider to develop the habit of correctly pronouncing words containing the *S* sound. She used the device in class for an hour immediately following each speech therapy session.

- Use in situations where the intended action is most relevant. Example: When Jordan used the MotivAider to improve his sitting posture, his teacher had him use the device only during the portion of the day when children were expected to remain in their seats.
- Use in situations where taking the intended action is most likely to produce rewarding results for the child, i.e., where the pay-off for the child is the greatest. For, example, when Aidan used the MotivAider to stay on task, his teacher asked him to use the device during those classroom activities where she felt there was the clearest and most favorable relationship between attending to his work and getting more of the play time he wanted.
- Use in situations where teachers, parents or other children are most apt to notice and react in reinforcing ways to the intended behavioral improvement. For example, when Wesley used the MotivAider to control his stuttering, his speech clinician had him use the device in a class where she felt the teacher would be most visibly excited about Wesley's newfound fluency. When Amy used the MotivAider to more assertively include herself in play with other children, her teacher had Amy use the MotivAider during an unstructured after-school program where the aides had been clued in to Amy's mission and were able to subtly call her attention to the favorable way other children responded to her efforts.
- Try to anticipate and solve logistical problems, such as how and where a child will get and leave the MotivAider and who will be responsible for loss or damage. The more obstacles and unaddressed concerns there are for the child, the less likely the child will be successful with the MotivAider.

- Build prompts and checks into the routine to make sure that the child is using the MotivAider properly. Whenever possible, involve others who have a stake in the child's success, who are able to play a constructive role in establishing and maintaining a MotivAider use routine, and who will notice and reinforce progress. Create frequent opportunities for the helper and child to discuss progress.

## **Step 7. Monitoring and Adjusting**

You can systematically adjust the time interval and the child's personal message in order to achieve the best results.

Here are some suggested guidelines for making adjustments:

- Make only one change at a time. For example, if you change the between-signals time interval, don't change the child's personal message at the same time.
- Use more caution in changing the message than in adjusting the between-signals time interval. Changing the message too often can dilute the MotivAider's effectiveness by weakening the association between the vibration and the message.
- If an adjustment results in an obvious decline in the child's performance, undo the adjustment. If an adjustment has neither a negative nor a positive effect, allow at least several days to pass before making further adjustments.
- While adjustments to the between-signals time interval and the personal message are central to the MotivAider Method, don't overlook opportunities to make adjustments in the child's use routine, the way the child wears the device, the strength or duration of the vibration signal, or any other factors that could have a bearing on the child's attitude about the MotivAider or her ease in using it.

- Again, always treat the child as a partner. Solicit his opinions, ideas and preferences and allow these to influence every aspect of MotivAider use. Always give the child credit for the good results he is getting. Praise him for using the MotivAider well. For example, say something like, "Wow, you sure are doing a terrific job of using the reminders your MotivAider is sending you."
- Encourage the child to let you know if the message she thinks changes a bit with use. It's important that the helper make a point of approving of such changes and that they are labeled as "improvements." For example, when Melea reported that the message, "Take one step at a time," had become simply, "One step," her teacher responded with, "That's another sign that you and your MotivAider are really working well together."
- Make sure that the child understands that he may not notice each and every vibration signal, that missing some signals is perfectly normal; that missing some signals won't prevent him from being successful with the MotivAider. (Children often respond favorably to signals they're not aware of noticing.)
- Check with the child often and encourage her to let you know if she has any questions about the MotivAider or is having any problems using it.

## **Step 8. Phasing Out the MotivAider**

An important objective of the MotivAider Method is to put itself out of business. Just how long the MotivAider will be needed depends on the child and on the nature of the desired behavioral change. The best way to find out whether a child who has been reliably making a desired behavioral change still needs the MotivAider is to experiment with sending signals less often.

Here's how to proceed:

- Make a modest increase in the between-signals time interval. For example, if the time interval is ten minutes, change it to fifteen minutes. Then monitor the child's behavior for any signs of decline.
- If improvements are maintained, lengthen the time interval again, and again watch for any backsliding.
- If the child maintains the desired behavioral change after two or three increases in the between-signals interval, the MotivAider can be tentatively discontinued. However, if you see any signs of decline as you carry out the phase-out process, just set the MotivAider back to a between-signals time interval that was accompanied by good results, and wait until the behavioral gains have been fully restored before attempting to phase out the MotivAider again.

The ideal scenario, of course, is one in which the MotivAider quickly enables a child to establish a permanent, self-sustaining habit. In reality, however, some desired behavioral changes are not self-sustaining. Changes, for example, that require the child to refrain from satisfying a pressing need or motive are the least self-sustaining, and these may require ongoing use of the MotivAider.

Note also that some behavior changes that can be achieved rather easily may nevertheless be susceptible to occasional backsliding. These changes can generally be restored by brief refresher use of the MotivAider.

## **Special Situations and Techniques**

### **Resuming MotivAider Use After a Lapse**

If a child who has stopped using the MotivAider needs to start using it again, be sure to provide the child with an abbreviated re-introduction to the device.

Generally speaking, if a child achieved good results with the MotivAider and initially did well after discontinuing it, he will need to use the MotivAider again only briefly to restore a desired change.

### **Using the MotivAider for a New Purpose**

The same child can use the MotivAider for more than one purpose. However, the MotivAider is designed to be used for only one purpose at a time. If a child is going to use the MotivAider for a new purpose, make sure you follow all the method steps. Be especially thorough when you carry out the step of associating the new message with the vibration.

When using the MotivAider for a new purpose, the child may initially experience some interference from the previous message. For example, a child who originally used the MotivAider to correct a posture problem initially found himself straightening his back even though he was now using the MotivAider for an altogether different purpose.

Prepare the child for the possibility of some interference. The interference generally passes fairly quickly. If it does persist, and only if it's problem, keep repeating Step 4.

### **Special Techniques**

Helpers are continuously developing new ways to use the MotivAider. Once you have a good feel for the device and the method, don't hesitate to break new ground.

**Use by Teachers.** Teachers often use the MotivAider themselves to stay tuned-in to a particular teaching objective or method.

- A teacher used the MotivAider to consistently behave in accord with his belief in the power of praise. Without the MotivAider reminding him every few minutes that "Praise is best," frustration caused his behavior to stray far away from his belief.
- A teacher used the MotivAider to prompt herself to look for opportunities to engage a quiet boy who she tended to lose in the shuffle of a busy classroom.
- A teacher used the MotivAider to remind herself to stay "Cool, calm and collected" while working with an extremely taxing student.
- Many teachers use the MotivAider to prompt themselves to monitor or observe a particular aspect of a child's behavior.

**Use by parents.** Parents are often thrown off course by the powerful emotions and reflexive responses that are prompted by their child's behavior. For example, a mother who often found herself involved in fruitless arguments with her first grade daughter, used the message, "Tweetle Beetle Battles" (inspired by a Dr. Seuss story), to remind herself to let the little things go by and to concentrate instead on "the big picture."

**Simultaneous use of the MotivAider by helper and child.** Excellent results have been achieved by having a child and helper use MotivAiders that have been synchronized to vibrate on the same schedule. For example, while one MotivAider vibrated every five minutes to remind a thumb-sucking kindergarten girl to keep her thumb out of her mouth, another MotivAider vibrated at precisely the same times to remind the girl's teacher to notice and reward the child's efforts with a warm smile.

By the way, helpers who have experimented with the synchronized MotivAider technique report that something magical happens when helper and child repeatedly focus their attention on the same objective at the same times.

## Resources

Visit <http://habitchange.com> to:

- Purchase MotivAiders
- Get additional information
- Download resources

For technical assistance, free consultation, training and any other requests or inquiries, please contact:

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