

Helping kids Change Their Own Behavior

The Helper's Guide to the MotivAider® Method

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- Part I -

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 stay focused on making that change. The device keeps children focused by automatically and repeatedly exposing them to a private *cue* that reminds and urges them to make the desired change.

The cue is a vibration signal that's designed to capture the child's attention and privately convey a personal message 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. In the same simple way that a ringing telephone has come to automatically *mean* "Someone is calling," associating the personal message with the MotivAider's signal causes the signal to automatically *mean* the child's personal message. The child, in other words, automatically *thinks* the message whenever he *feels* the vibration.

Because a 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

Benefits of using the MotivAider Method include:

- 1) **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 success they've achieved.
- 2) **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.
- 3) **Privacy.** Because the MotivAider works *privately*, it prevents the child from suffering the *public relations damage* that can be done when others are repeatedly exposed to helpers' attempts to correct a child's behavior.

When to Use the MotivAider

The MotivAider helps children change their own behavior. It allows them to accomplish what they want to accomplish. It is not designed to promote changes that children themselves have no interest in making.

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 *sometimes* 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 behavioral goal.

STEP 3. Devise a personal message.

Help the child select a word, phrase, short sentence or image that will remind and urge him to take the action.

STEP 4. Attach the message to the vibration signal.

Help the child 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 he 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 re-word 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 vibrations less often and/or by having the child use the MotivAider less often.

Operating the MotivAider

The MotivAider has been continuously improved since its introduction in 1988. Controls and available features vary by model. For information on how to operate the MotivAider, please consult the fan-folded instruction sheet that accompanied your MotivAider.

MotivAiders with a small oval button to the right of the SET/RUN switch incorporate advanced features which will allow you to more fully customize the MotivAider to suit each child's needs and preferences.

Advanced features include:

- A *pulsing* vibration signal that does a better job of capturing the child's attention.
- Electronic adjustment of both vibration strength and duration to create the most effective signal for each child.
- Choice between sending signals on a regular versus a variable (average) interval basis.
- Ability to send signals as often as every few seconds.
- Choice of what is displayed on the screen while the MotivAider is working.

The Helper's Influence

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

Characteristics of the helper can become associated in the child's mind with the MotivAider's vibration signal. If the MotivAider is associated with a helper who the child likes, trusts and is eager to please, the MotivAider's vibration signal will have greater motivating power. By the same token, a poor relationship between the child and helper can detract from the MotivAider's effectiveness and can even cause the child to reject the MotivAider.

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 what he wants to achieve.

Here are some tips on how to present the MotivAider:

- If more than one helper is involved, the MotivAider should be presented by the 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 he wants to achieve. For example, "This is an invention that helps kids remember 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."
- Discuss the desired behavioral change in a way that highlights the benefits the child will enjoy once the change has been made. To do this well, you must know what is important to the child - what he 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 (or a *buddy*) with him that will keep reminding him to make the desired change.
- Emphasize the MotivAider's privacy by making comments such as, "It's our special secret" and "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*]." (If you have the model with the oval button, consider showing the child the various advanced user settings and how they can be changed.)
- Show the child how he 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.) Invite the child to participate in selecting the best way for him to wear or carry the MotivAider.

-Part II-

The Method Steps In Depth

Step 1. Setting a Goal

It's best to start with a goal that is relatively easy for the child to achieve and that is 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 will 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 him 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 on just making sure that the child remains in his 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 Stephanie 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.

Determining the best action for the child to take to achieve a given goal can require some thought, skill and experience on the part of the helper. For example, in helping Rachel achieve the goal of eliminating her thumb-sucking habit, instead of suggesting the action, "Keep your thumb out of your mouth," her teacher suggested the action, "Keep your idle hands folded in your lap." The teacher recognized that specifying a positive behavior to replace the unwanted behavior was the best way to achieve the goal.

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 conjure up a specific picture or image (for example, shaking hands with a movie star or athlete the child idolizes), can also be extremely effective.

Monitoring is a type of private 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, may check to see if they're *on-task*.

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

When devising actions, keep these points in mind:

- *Make sure the child is capable of performing the action.*

A helper can unknowingly devise an action that a child is actually incapable of performing no matter how motivated he may be. For example, a child with brain dysfunction may be unable to focus his attention no matter how hard he tries. If you have any doubts about whether the child can perform a given action, seek the advice of an appropriate expert. Steer clear of actions you're not sure the child can perform. Fortunately, there is often more than one action that will allow a child to achieve a particular goal.

- *Make sure you have enough information to know that carrying out the action will indeed enable the child to achieve his goal.*

Without enough information, it's possible to devise an action that the child is able and motivated to perform, but which will nevertheless fail to produce the desired result.

For example, Mary had a problem with incontinence in school. Her teacher initially devised the action, "Check your bladder to see if you have to go." When accidents persisted despite the fact that Mary was consistently remembering to check for bladder tension, the teacher backtracked and got more information from Mary's family. She discovered that Mary had a medical problem that prevented her from actually sensing tension even when her

bladder was full. Once the action was changed to simply "Go to the bathroom," Mary 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.*

Whenever possible, choose actions that bring results that, in turn, encourage further positive changes. For example, an action that causes others to respond more favorably to a child can instigate a *benevolent cycle*. To illustrate, when Justin, an 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 Justin to improve the range and quality of his social skills. When Heather took the action of being more polite in her interactions with her mother, her mother responded with greater warmth, which in turn caused Heather to exhibit fewer symptoms of emotional insecurity in school.

Step 3. Devising a Message

The purpose of a personal message is to urge the *child to take his action*. A message can be a word, a phrase, a brief sentence or even an image that the child can easily remember and understand. The message need not mean anything to anyone but the child who receives it. Although the *right* message may at times turn out to be nothing more than a simple statement of the action it's intended to prompt, the task of devising an effective message can provide the helper with an opportunity to exercise lots of creativity.

A message can concentrate on reminding a child *what* to do, *why* to do it, or both. In devising messages, it's important to think first about what the child on his own is *missing*.

For example, Jennifer was not in the least bit reluctant to breathe through her nose whenever she was reminded to do it. She was sufficiently motivated. She just needed to be reminded of *what* to do. So, all it took was the simple message, "Breathe through your nose" to get Jennifer to breathe properly.

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

"The early bird gets the worm" is the message that helped Kyle 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 Kyle, 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.

Consider Ryan, an athletic fourth-grader whose academic performance was being hampered by his tendency to talk to other kids when he should have been concentrating on doing his own work. His teacher wondered if Ryan would do a better job of concentrating if the thought, "Do my own work," periodically entered his mind. After thinking about Ryan for a while, she concluded that a simple message like this probably wouldn't work because Ryan so enjoyed talking to the other kids that he wouldn't be too keen on stopping. She concluded that he needed a message that would somehow make concentrating more worthwhile for him than visiting. So, with Ryan's help, she came up with the motivating message, "Kirby Puckett," a message that reminded Ryan that his parents had promised to buy him a new Kirby Puckett baseball glove as soon as Ryan's grades improved. The teacher reasoned that thinking, "Kirby Puckett," would focus Ryan'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. Consider Molly, a peanut-butter loving third grader whose rate of speech approached the speed of light. After her speech therapist helped Molly devise the message, "Imagine you're eating peanut butter," Molly got better results than she had been getting 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 skills and/or positive feelings are initially lacking. For example, Jarred, an avid hockey player whose attention wandered in school, was reminded to "Tend the net" in class. Jackie, 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. Matthew, a fourth grader whose inattentiveness to his surroundings caused a variety of problems, benefited only slightly from the straightforward message, "Pay attention to what's around you." When his teacher discovered that he loves detective stories, they changed the message to, "Look for clues, Sherlock." The improvement was dramatic.

Step 4. Attaching the Message to the Vibration

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

Place the slide switch at SET and press both timer control buttons at the same time to zero the display. Now, let the child hold the MotivAider against his body and tell him that whenever he feels the MotivAider vibrate, it will remind him to think [*his personal message*]." Then move the slide switch to RUN, and while the MotivAider vibrates, model for the child by saying, "Now, 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, but this time, prompt the child to recite the message. Do this two or three more times.

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 Between-Signals Time Interval

By controlling how often the MotivAider vibrates, you are essentially controlling how often the child's personal message will pass through his mind. You control how often the MotivAider vibrates by *setting the amount of time between signals*. So, the shorter the between-signals interval, the more often the MotivAider will vibrate.

In selecting an initial between-signals time interval, carefully consider the child, the message, the intended action, and any other factors you believe may have a bearing on how often the child should receive signals. If you have no idea of what between-signals interval to select, just start with an interval of ten minutes.

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

As with all other aspects of the MotivAider Method, considering adjustments in the between-signals interval should be regarded as an opportunity to treat the child as a partner. Some children may benefit from being given full responsibility for adjusting the between-signals interval on their own as soon as they begin to achieve favorable results.

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:

- *Use soon after learning or formally practicing a new skill to capitalize on familiarity and promote carryover.*

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 John 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.

Example: When Laura used the MotivAider to remind herself to speak softly, her teacher asked Laura to use the device during recesses, lunch periods and other occasions when she was most apt to speak loudly.

- *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.*

Example: When Bradley 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.*

Example: When Scott 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 Scott's newfound fluency.

Example: When Kristen used the MotivAider to quit sucking her thumb, her teacher sent the device home with Kristen so that her parents could see and reinforce her progress.

Example: 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 appropriately. 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. Included in a MotivAider use routine should be frequent opportunities for the helper and child to discuss progress.

Step 7. Monitoring and Adjusting

You can systematically adjust the between-signals interval and the child's personal message in order to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Follow these guidelines for monitoring results and 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 connection the child makes between the vibration and the message.
- Allow adequate time to evaluate the effectiveness of each adjustment.
- 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 his 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 he thinks changes slightly 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 Sally 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.
- Encourage the child to let you know if she has any questions or problems using the MotivAider.

Step 8. Phasing Out the MotivAider

An important objective of the MotivAider Method is to rely on the device no longer than necessary. 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 reminders less often.

Proceed as follows:

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 should be tentatively discontinued. If you see any signs of decline as you carry out the phase-out process, 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, which require the child to refrain from satisfying a pressing need or motive are the most difficult to maintain. These may

require ongoing use of the MotivAider. 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, a child who has achieved good results with the MotivAider before and who did well for a time after discontinuing it 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 herself straightening her back even though she was now using the MotivAider for an altogether different purpose.

Prepare the child for the possibility of some initial interference. The interference should pass fairly quickly. If interference persists, keep repeating the pairing procedure.

Special Techniques

Helpers are continuously developing new techniques and applications for the MotivAider. Here are just a few to stimulate your imagination:

Use by Teachers. Teachers often use the MotivAider themselves to stay tuned-in to a particular teaching objective or method. For instance, one teacher used the MotivAider to consistently behave in accord with his faith 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. Another 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. Another teacher used the MotivAider to remind herself to stay "Cool, calm and collected" while working with a very 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. 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 which have been synchronized to vibrate on the same schedule. For example, while one MotivAider vibrated every five minutes to remind a kindergarten girl to keep her thumb out of her mouth, another MotivAider vibrated at precisely the same times to remind the girls's teacher to notice and reward the child's efforts with a warm smile. Many helpers who have experimented with the *synchronized* MotivAider technique believe that it holds enormous potential. They report that something almost magical happens when helper and child repeatedly focus their attention on the same behavioral change at the very same time.

Notes