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How do you get kids to do their homework? Help them shape a positive but realistic image of themselves as successful adults.

[By Tom Jacobs](#)



The key to getting kids to do their homework involves helping them shape a positive but realistic image of themselves as successful adults. (Luca di Filippo / istockphoto.com)

Why do so many teens lack the necessary motivation to rigorously focus on their schoolwork? To quote William Shakespeare — whom your seventh-grader should be studying right now, rather than instant-messaging her friends — the problem may be in their mind’s eye.

That’s the conclusion of a [new study](#) by two University of Michigan researchers, who find a link between schoolwork, grades and the vision kids have of themselves as happy, successful adults.

They report some middle school students see themselves becoming doctors or lawyers — professions that require a good education — while others have visions of becoming movie stars or sports heroes. Overwhelmingly, those in both categories express the intention of going to college, but guess which ones do the actual work required to get there and succeed?

Writing in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, [Mesmin Destin](#) and [Daphna Oyserman](#) describe two experiments conducted in Detroit-area middle schools. In the first, 266 eighth-graders in a poor, predominantly black district were asked to think about the job they think they envision themselves having as an adult. The answers were compared with their grade point averages and the amount of time they spent doing homework.

While nearly nine out of 10 said they expected to go to college, only 46 percent reported having an “education-dependent adult identity,” the researchers write. Members of that minority “were more likely to invest current effort in schoolwork than those who did not, and these efforts paid off in better grades.”

Why bother to study if you see yourself as a future NBA star or a winner on *American Idol*?

In the second experiment, 295 seventh-graders were shown one of two graphs. The first “showed a step-wise increase in median earnings by level of education.” The second “showed median earnings in Michigan and the very high earnings of top actors, athletes and musicians.” All were then given the option of doing an extra-credit assignment.

The results were not subtle. Those who saw the chart linking wages with education were eight times more likely to complete the optional task.

To Destin and Oyserman, this “demonstrates the power of subtle cues” to help students connect work done today with a successful future. Such “small interventions” (to use the researchers’ term) can pay major dividends.

Kids, in other words, are much like adults: They’re not going to work hard unless they envision some sort of payoff.

This research suggests that rather than berating them for bad grades, it'd be far more productive to help them shape that vision and understand the direct connection between effort today and success tomorrow.