

## **Stars, Stickers and Other Myths of Motivation**

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**The idea that extrinsic rewards encourage learning is so entrenched in Australian education, it has become an idea we rarely challenge. In reality, extrinsic rewards do little more than encourage short term compliance and a love of yet bigger rewards...**

In 2013, we live in a world that positively embraces, and even expects, the use of rewards as a means of motivating adults and children in every arena of life. Adults working in large corporations are given Christmas bonuses and performance related pay. Shoppers are given free coffee with repeated visits to a favoured café and university students are given prizes for high performance. Many educators rationalize the use of reward systems in schools as a logical mirroring of the adult world. “If it is a good idea to reward a hard working adult, surely it is a good idea to reward a hard working child?”

As a consequence we offer rewards to children all the way from pre-school to year 12. Young children are presented with stickers and gold stars for ‘being nice’ to each other. Older children are enticed with the possibility of merit certificates, lucky dip prizes and class movies. Similarly, many schools now embrace token economies where children exchange awarded tokens for prizes ranging from pencils to pizza. Further along the educational journey, multicoloured praise is replaced with the possibility of high grades and ‘awards’ for high academic achievement and a positive attitude.

Many parents are also advocates of the reward based approach to getting things done. Parents reward children for doing well at home and at school. We pay our children to load the dishwasher and offer them movies if they get their homework done. Many children are even rewarded for receiving rewards...

All of this occurs on the shoulders of an enormous body of research demonstrating that rewards actually reduce, rather than increase, long term motivation. In fact, extrinsic rewards not only reduce sustainable intrinsic motivation, they reduce the quality of performance on all tasks, impact negatively on our relationships and lead to increased dissatisfaction with learning. If this wasn't enough of a claim, we also know, there is no evidence to the contrary. There is no support for the use of any extrinsic reward system as a means of improving task motivation or a desire to embrace any sort of life long learning.

We may well ask: “What about the five year old who sits quietly when promised a smiley sticker? What about the fact that the class completed their project when given the possibility of a class party? What about the teenager who worked harder than ever in hope of getting an A?”

Certainly these outcomes occur, however, not because of motivation but because of compliance. Rewards are most definitely desirable, by definition. Adults and children alike will do all manner of things to earn them. However, what this ultimately means is that rewards primarily increase compliance. The only motivation developed is the motivation for gaining rewards, not for the tasks themselves.

Problems arise when we reward tasks that require intrinsic motivation for continued perseverance. For example, research has found that children who are rewarded for reading in year three are less motivated to read by year six. Rewards result in a loss of interest in reading as a rewarding activity in itself. This loss of intrinsic motivation results in children being less inclined to read for pleasure, less bothered about improving their reading repertoire and ultimately less literate than their peers. They become less literate than both non-rewarded readers and children who do no reading outside of class time.

The findings are the same for all manner of activities whether academic, social or emotional. When kids are rewarded for desirable behaviour, they may show more compliance to the teachers' rules, but they end up with a less positive attitude to the teacher and to the other students in a classroom. Classes that initially run on the basis of reward systems end up as less cohesive and less desirable places to be.

As both parent and educator, I have certainly resorted to my own share of bribery and performance pay offs. As such, I appreciate that even with sound research support; the idea of letting go of rewards can leave a very large hole in any classroom management policy. If it is not a great idea to 'pay' children to perform well, how do we get them to comply? How do we get them to have a go at new and challenging activities?

Encouraging positive behaviour and a love of learning is, at least initially, a more challenging process than the instant compliance obtained from a tempting reward. Still, it is a process that pays dividends in the long term. Here are three factors vital to increasing ongoing motivation and a love of life long learning

### **Relationships, relationships, relationships**

Students of all ages are more likely to comply with class rules and have a go at challenging activities if they have a positive relationship with their teacher. Build a positive relationship by managing your own stress effectively (teacher wellbeing is a foundation for effective education), and taking an active interest in the feelings and aspirations of your students. Ask "how are you?" "How was your weekend?"

### **Self reflection**

Ask students to reflect on the strengths in their own performance before you give them your feedback. Ask them what they have done well, what they have enjoyed about a task, what they have learnt. In modern society we tend to get so caught up with extrinsic feedback, we lose sight of the importance of self reflection.

## **Discuss and describe**

Avoid falling into the trap of offering the easiest reward of all – praise. Rather than stating ‘well done’ in response to a desired behaviour, try simply describing what has occurred “I see you have tidied up the paints”. Show your interest in a student’s progress by noticing something specific they have done. For example it is far more constructive to say “I see you have organized your report into a clear sequence of steps” rather than simply offering the reward of “great work”...

Extrinsic reward systems are so entrenched in Australian education it may seem inconceivable not to use them in our classrooms. However, even if reward systems are here to stay, it is time that we approached them with a healthy dose of skepticism. We need to remind ourselves that compliance and motivation are not the same thing.

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