

Information

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Rewarding Children

Many parents wonder what the difference is between a bribe and a reward. After all, in both instances, your child is getting something for doing what you want him to do. But when is this helpful in teaching him better behavior, and when is it harmful?

"I'll give you an Xbox if you'll just clean your room!"

It's important to understand that bribery can become an ongoing pattern that ultimately teaches your child to act out to get what they want.

This parental plea might sound like an exaggeration, but it's actually not as far off-base as you might think.



I heard many parents describe interactions with their kids in which they promised all manners of enticing treats and activities in exchange for behaving appropriately. Parents end up feeling as though they are desperately bribing their children to comply. Kids can come to expect something extra for simply executing their daily responsibilities, which can in turn lead to a false sense of entitlement.

To understand how rewards work, it can be helpful to think in terms of how the work world operates. You do your job and complete the tasks that are required of your position, and your concrete reward is a paycheck. While there are numerous other ways in which work can be satisfying, the paycheck is the tangible form of a reward that you receive. For your child, motivation to please parents and teachers might apply more during different phases of development than others, but for the most part, children tend to be externally motivated by things they want or enjoy.

Don't get me wrong, most children want to stay in the good graces of their parents, but if they are given rewards regardless of how they behave, the incentive to practice new skills disappears. As I'll explain next, it is recommended that parents come up with a list of rewards with their child ahead of time. That way, when your child behaves in the grocery store, he knows ahead of time what his paycheck will be—and so will you.

Pairing James Lehman's concept of Strategic Recognition and Affection with tangible rewards (the child's version of the paycheck) is one of the most effective ways to reinforce appropriate behavior. This is the use of sincere praise, along with a genuine pat on the back when your child makes progress on something which is difficult for him. Next, add concrete rewards that are of a currency that your child values to complete the picture. *You* know what your child likes—maybe it's video games, television, art supplies, or sleepovers with friends. Try making a list of incentives that your child can earn on a daily basis, in addition to "bigger ticket" items that he could achieve over time.



Again, have your child participate in the creation of this list. Helping to keep your child's "eye on the prize" while serving as his supportive coach during moments when he begins to digress, can create significant results.

Whenever possible, determine most rewards ahead of time, be clear with behavioral expectations and do not forget the crucial teaching component. It is important to understand that we cannot expect kids to do something differently if they do not know how. Your child's behavior can often be linked to the developmental stage he is moving through. Keeping this in mind is significant because it helps us soften our view. In other words, it's not that kids are always deviously acting out—they may just be exercising an undesirable method of accomplishing a developmentally normal task.

As adults, we have made it this far in the world because of what we have learned. Lend them your skills! You can guide your children to use more appropriate ways of checking off milestones. This might involve problem-solving conversations, role playing, or planned "field tests" that allow your kids to practice the new skills they are acquiring. Being a coach and teacher are two of the most effective hats you can wear as a parent.

In the end, be kind to yourself—we parents are all still learning too! Taking a look at *what* behavior you might be reinforcing and *how* you are reinforcing it may lead to a change in your approach and yield better results. Remember that when you resort to bribery to control your child's behavior, the price that you wind up paying is actually a lot higher than it may seem in the moment. Instead, require that your child earn reasonable rewards by taking care of his responsibilities and making positive strides in improving his behavior.

Pointers to help get children to achieve on their own...

Focus the child on his/her own pleasure at achieving.

Instead of lavishing children with congratulations, it's better if they focus internally on the pleasure they derive from accomplishment. Children are naturally thirsty to achieve, learn and conquer. They are born with an insatiable zest for mastery, and each new attainment fills them with delight. It is this self-enjoyment which provides the greatest fuel for perseverance and further learning. When you see your child do something new, it can be wonderfully encouraging and supportive to say: "you look like you enjoyed that!", or: how did it feel to do that?". "I'm glad you did that, you look happy with yourself!".

Help him/her to self-evaluate.

Whenever possible, it is a good idea to ask your child about their own self-evaluation. For instance: "how do *you* like your drawing?", "are *you* happy with how that piece fits into the puzzle?".

Ask them about their inner experiences.

Say, for instance, your child reads you a story he just composed. After sharing how the story made you feel, you could ask: "How do you feel about the story you wrote?", "How did it feel to write it?", "Did you enjoy telling it?", "How did you come up with those ideas for your story?". There are few things so nourishing to your child's self-esteem, and so enriching to your relationship with him, than your interest in his inner world of feeling and imagination.

Use "I" statements, instead of labeling the child.

Your appreciation touches your child more deeply when it is expressed in terms of your feelings. For instance: "I like the colors you chose!", or "I love how you sang that song!" - instead of: "what a good drawer you are!", or "gee you're a good singer". Avoid labeling statements like: "Good boy for sharing your toys!". Say instead: "thanks for sharing with your friend, that felt good to him - and to me". Focus on your feelings, not on a moral or quality-oriented label. An "I" statement keeps you from holding a position of power over your child. It creates an honest and fulfilling connection between you while not interfering with their experience of themselves.

Comment on the behavior, not on the person.

Feedback and acknowledgment are definitely important. Imagine your child has just played you a new piece she has learned on the piano. Instead of saying: "What a good player you are!", you could tell her how much you enjoyed the piece. Better still, be specific. Tell her what in particular you liked about her playing (e.g. the passion or emotion, the beautiful melody, how carefully she played, her sense of rhythm, etc.)



This information sheet has been issued by:

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Play Therapy * Counselling * Trauma Counselling

Please note that this information must not be used for diagnostic purposes. Please visit a medical professional for a correct diagnosis.