

PUNISHED BY REWARDS

A mother of a four-year-old recently had a behavior system she enacted to get her daughter to stop hitting, yelling and treating her disrespectfully. She was giving her daughter money each time she behaved “correctly.”

While systems like this may seem logical to most grown-ups, they are in fact viewed by most contemporary child development experts as ineffective. These methods may seem to curb unwanted, negative behaviors in the short-term but they prove ineffective in the long-term picture of a child’s life. Why? Because they provide only “extrinsic motivation,” which means the behaviors appear to stop only as long as the rewards continue. Without getting to the root of the behavior problems, the weed grows back. It may look different next time as the negative behaviors change, but their reasons for existing continue unabated.

The true goal for children is to instill “intrinsic motivation,” where the incentive to behave appropriately comes from a desire within, rather than an eagerness for an external reward or a fear of an external punishment.

One way this is achieved is by providing “normal social consequences.” In other words, cause and effect or “the punishment fits the crime.” Teaching children the expected consequences of a behavior will better prepare them for times when you are not around to dole out rewards or punishments. For example, if a child doesn’t put the caps back on the markers, he doesn’t get yelled at for being irresponsible. He simply no longer has markers to use for a while because they dried out. If a child throws a book at a sibling, she may calmly be told that she will be without books for a while.

Overall, the ideal goal is to support children’s developing sense of “intrinsic motivation,” or the internal desire to behave appropriately rather than waiting to receive external rewards or punishments. Generally try to avoid “sticker systems” or giving children money, toys or food treats for behaving “well.”

However – in contrast – there are times when a sticker system or incentive program can be beneficial. If you decide to use this type of short-term system with your preschool-aged or older child here are a few aspects to consider:

- An incentive system should be used for only one behavioral expectation at a time, stated positively to your child. In other words, say “You will receive a sticker for each car ride that you keep your hands and legs to yourself” as opposed to “You will get a sticker when you don’t hit, don’t punch, don’t poke and don’t kick your brother.”
- Be specific about the expected behavior. Don’t just say that the incentive is for “being good,” “being a big girl,” or for “treating someone with respect.”
- Clearly communicate what the reward will be and the number of stickers it will take to receive the reward. Pick a low enough number to set your child up for success.
- Choose a reward that is meaningful for your child, but not one that will be devastating if not received. Don’t use money or food – they truly can create future adults who are greedy or materialistic or who overeat, using food to comfort their adult pains.
- Be consistent, calm and fair in judging your child’s success each and every time. Ask your child if he thinks he was successful.
- The goal of a short-term system like this must always be to wean your child off of it. Help your child notice and develop an appreciation for their successful abilities so that they will be motivated to succeed after the incentive system has stopped.

Most importantly, make sure your child knows that your love is not conditional on their behaviors; you may hate hitting, name-calling or a messy room, but you will always love them!

There are also many valuable resources available to spur your thinking, such as the book [Punished by Rewards](#) by Alfie Kohn. A new DVD of a recent lecture of his, entitled “Unconditional Parenting” is also quite interesting.