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Newt Gingrich's Reading Plan

By Alfie Kohn

Our culture is marinated in behaviorism. At work, at school, and at home, we take for granted that the way to get things done is to dangle goodies in front of people. Thus, it seemed perfectly reasonable to observers across the political spectrum when Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich in February inaugurated a national campaign to pay children to read. The program, devised some time ago at West Georgia College, offers students $2 for each book they finish. (See Education Week, 2/22/95.)

Politicians can be forgiven, perhaps, for a simple-minded faith in behavioral manipulation. But educators ought to know by now, in light of research and experience, that rewards are not merely ineffective over the long haul but actually counterproductive.

One study after another has demonstrated that the more someone is rewarded for doing something (or for doing it well), the less interest that person is likely to have in whatever he or she was rewarded for doing. Consider:

Children who are frequently rewarded by their parents are somewhat less generous than their peers. (They've learned that the only reason to help is that they will get something for doing so.)

Students who are led to think about grades tend to be less interested in learning, less likely to think creatively, and less likely to choose difficult assignments than those who are encouraged to focus on the task itself. (The point is to do only what is necessary to snag an A, a mindset that is, as one researcher put it, the "enemy of exploration." Small wonder that students come to ask: "Do we have to know this? Is this going to be on the test?")

When children are offered tangible or verbal rewards for drinking an unfamiliar beverage, they are less apt to like that beverage later than are children who were never rewarded for drinking it in the first place. (They may have reasoned, "If this lady has to bribe me to try this, it must be something I won't like"-- a thought process hardly limited to beverages.)

Consider the depressingly pervasive program called "Book It!"--Pizza Hut's edible precursor to Mr. Gingrich's plan. Since doggie biscuits can train the family pet, it was naturally assumed that pepperoni could get kids to open more books. And indeed, in some cases it does just that. After all, rewards, like punishments, often succeed in buying temporary compliance.

But what is the effect on these students' choice of reading (hint: look for a run on short books with large type), their comprehension of what they've read, and above all, their attitude toward reading when the program is over? The late educational psychologist John Nicholls speculated several years ago that the likely result of this program would be "a lot of fat kids who don't like to read."

Part of the problem is that many of us assume there exists a single entity called "motivation," such that students can have more or less of it. We want them to have more, so we offer stickers and stars, A's and praise, candy and cash. But what educational and social psychologists have learned is that there are qualitatively different kinds of motivation, and more of one kind often means less of another.

Extrinsic motivators (inducements outside the task) are not only inferior to intrinsic motivation (an interest in the task itself): They actually tend to undermine such interest.

Thus, the question we need to ask is not "How motivated is this student?" but "How is this student motivated?" What matters is not the amount but the type of motivation involved--whether a child, for example, is encouraged to see reading as something gratifying in its own right ... or as a tedious prerequisite to getting a reward.

The fact that interest in learning is typically undermined by offering rewards is not only a disturbing discovery in itself, but also a powerful explanation for another well-replicated finding: Rewards usually reduce the quality of performance, particularly on challenging tasks. A quarter of a century ago, Prof. Janet Spence, later to become the president of the American Psychological Association, wrote that rewards "have effects that interfere with performance in ways that we are only beginning to understand."

Of course, there is nothing wrong with pizza or money, per se. The problem comes when we offer such things contingently, and they become devices to manipulate behavior. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan at the University of Rochester have pointedly referred to the use of rewards as "control through seduction."

The most destructive arrangement of all, then, is to pile one reward on another--for example, by promising money or goodies to students who get good grades. A Minneapolis-based program called "Renaissance" (which might more accurately be termed "Dark Ages") does exactly this. Not content merely to encourage students to see the point of school as collecting good grades, this program sets up a kind of caste system in which students are issued color-coded i.d. cards corresponding to their grade-point average that entitle them to differential discounts from local merchants. If some foundation perversely commissioned me to develop a program whose aim was to utterly destroy children's interest in learning, I honestly don't think I could top this one.

Likewise, if a school institutes a "good citizenship" program, in which the aim is to "catch children doing something right" and offer them rewards for their good behavior, we can practically watch children's empathy evaporate before our eyes. Again, it isn't just that trying to control behavior fails to develop any commitment to that behavior; it's that rewards actively displace the motives and values that matter. Instead of helping children to ask, "What kind of person do I want to be?" or "What kind of community do we want to have?" a child in such a school is led to ask, "What do they want me to do, and what do I get for doing it?"

Here are three objections commonly offered to this sort of criticism:

1. "Why not use rewards at first to lure students into reading or helping, and then fade them out later?" Unfortunately, this bait-and-switch approach is naive in overlooking the fundamental difference in motives between what is created by rewards and what we ultimately want. The introduction of an extrinsic motivator immediately changes the whole Gestalt--the way a child looks at herself, the way she looks at the person offering the reward, and the way she looks at the task.

2. "What if students aren't intrinsically motivated to do what we're asking?" The trouble may be more with what we're asking than with their lack of interest. If children are required to multiply rows of naked numbers, memorize a bunch of facts, or slog through sodden textbooks--things that few members of our species would find interesting--then it is no wonder adults resort to offering bribes (and threats). But the challenge is to come up with engaging tasks, and to bring students into the process of

making decisions about their learning, rather than coercing them into compliance. Kids' natural capacity to help others, meanwhile, is best tapped by explaining, modeling, and transforming schools into caring communities.

3. "Adults are paid for working; why not pay children for learning?" To begin with, this rather desperate rationalization ignores the crucial difference between pay and pay-for-performance plans at work. Getting employees to see compensation as a reward (through bonuses and such) is notably counterproductive if the objective is quality rather than quantity, if the task requires any degree of creativity, and if the time frame extends beyond what happens today.

Second, and more important, nothing in school is really analogous to money, which adults must earn one way or the other. Here, our concern is with helping students not only to read but to want to read, to become lifelong learners and decent people. Even if incentives were effective with employees, this would offer no justification whatsoever for using them to reach a different set of goals with a developmentally different group of people.

We need to work with children to tap their natural desire to make sense of the world and to play with words and numbers and ideas. Rewards, however well-intentioned, are basically ways of doing things to someone. Educators need to help politicians understand that in the long run, carrots and sticks are bound to backfire.

Alfie Kohn is the author of four books on human behavior and education, including *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble With Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Houghton Mifflin), which contains the citations for the research described here.
