
The Case Against Gold Stars

By Alfie Kohn

Call it the “gold-star syndrome.” Sometimes we paste stars on a chart. At other times we offer toys or extra TV, candy or cash, pizza or special privileges. We reward kids for doing what we want instead of punishing them for disobeying.

Pull out a child-care book at random — or just watch a typical parent at home — and you’ll notice that the emphasis is on “positive reinforcement.” It is so pervasive that few of us pause to question its effects.

The bad news, according to a growing body of research, is that bribery — which is what rewards amount to — is not much of an improvement over punishing children. In fact, I strongly believe that rewards and punishments really aren’t opposites at all. They are two sides of the same coin, and the coin doesn’t buy very much.

“Rewards work!” many parents insist. But work to do what? And at what cost? The answer to the first question is that rewards, like punishments, are extremely effective at getting us one thing and one thing only: temporary obedience. What they can never do, however, is help children become responsible, ethical, decent people.

Studies conclude that rewards are ineffective. In the process of writing a [book](#) on the subject, I’ve found hundreds of studies showing that rewards are strikingly ineffective at producing lasting change in attitudes or behaviors. Once the rewards run out, people go right back to acting the way they did. And no wonder. Rewards don’t create an enduring commitment to any value or action; they merely change what we do.

Consider the questions that children may ask themselves. Threaten a punishment and a child will come to ask, “What am I supposed to do, and what will happen to me if I don’t do it?” Bribe him by dangling a reward and he’ll wonder, “What am I supposed to do, and what will I get for doing it?” Notice how similar these two questions are, and how different from what we want children to ask: “What kind of person do I want to be?” Good values have to be grown from the inside out; bribes and threats at best change children’s behavior only for a while.

But isn’t temporary compliance sometimes good enough? Clearly it is tempting to use any means at our disposal to stop a four-year old from making a fuss at the store, to get an eight year-old out the door on time, or to get a ten-year-old to settle down and finish her homework. In the short term, a sufficiently appealing carrot will usually work. But the long-term costs are considerable.

Rewards simply control through seduction rather than force, according to University of Rochester psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, and all techniques that rely on control ultimately undermine what children need in order to make good decisions and take responsibility for their actions. At least two studies have shown, for example, that kids whose parents reward them

frequently are less generous than their peers.

Surprising? It shouldn't be. A child promised a treat or praised extravagantly for helping people has learned that the only reason to act that way is that he'll get something for it. No reward, no reason to care.

Other research shows that the more students are led to focus on getting good grades, the less interested they will be in what they are studying, the less creative their thinking will be, and the more they will try to take the easy way out. Again, it makes sense: The more children see the "A" as the goal, the more they will come to see the learning itself as something to be gotten over with. The practice of paying kids for top grades — offering, in effect, a reward for a reward — doubles the damage.

At the University of Illinois, researchers introduced some preschoolers to a beverage called kefir. Some were just asked to drink it; others were praised lavishly or promised treats for drinking. Did the rewarded kids slurp down more kefir? You bet. But a week later they wanted nothing to do with the stuff, whereas the children offered no reward liked it just as much as, if not more than, before.

Substitute reading, doing math, or acting responsibly for drinking kefir, and you begin to glimpse the destructive power of rewards. In fact, a good general rule is that the more we want our children to want to do somethings, the more counterproductive it will be to reward them for doing it.

It's not the reward itself that's objectionable — it's the practice of using something as a reward that causes the problem: "Do this and you'll get that." This feels controlling, causes dependence, and may spoil our relationship with our children. We risk coming to be seen as goody dispensers who have to be pleased rather than as loving and caring allies.

What's the alternative? Even praise, if the emphasis is on doing what we want and what makes us happy, can be counterproductive. There is, however, nothing wrong with positive comments that acknowledge and encourage what children have done — and leave them feeling proud of themselves. Such comments are nice but if our long-term goal is more ambitious than getting kids to obey mindlessly, then we'll have to take the extra step of bringing them in on the process of making decisions.

You might say to your seven year-old, "I've noticed that lately it's taking you a long time to get dressed in the morning, honey. What do you think we can do to solve that?" And we have to reconsider some of our requests instead of just forcing compliance. For example, rather than fall back on bribes to get a four-year-old to sit through a long dinner, we might reflect on whether that expectation is age-appropriate.

Giving up anything that we're used to is a challenge. But the evidence is clear: Rewards may be effective at training a pet, but raising good kids means working with them rather than doing things to them.

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