

The Role of Rewards

“I tend to personally reward myself for acts of exceptional discipline.”

~ Robert Vaughn

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF REWARDS in aiding development? A surprise in the car for leaving school quickly. A star chart for doing homework on time. Researchers in psychology have explored the effects of external motivators on children extensively, documenting when incentives help and when they hurt.

I am reminded of my “bright idea” to help a hesitant two-year-old family member to walk the aisle as a wedding ring bearer by telling him he would get a shiny red truck at the end. Rehearsal without the reward went fine. However, in the crowded church on the day of wedding, the boy hung back. Then someone whispered about the reward, giving him a burst of confidence. The little ring bearer took off like an Olympic runner, full speed to the front of the church, where he demanded, “Where’s my truck?”

Offering incentives can motivate a child and help him move beyond obstacles. On the other hand, the process can lower motivation if the reward itself overrides, as in my example, the enjoyment of the activity.

For instance, in more than one reading center I have witnessed transformations through external rewards. Children who would cry at the prospect of reading changed their attitudes dramatically when systematically given tickets (to buy small toys later) after 10-minute reading sessions. In this case, as with many systematic approaches like star charts, the prospect of working toward a reward took children’s minds off their resistance to the activity and helped them out of associating reading with distress.

On the other hand, studies of library incentive programs aimed at developing a love of reading often lead to unforeseen behaviors, like picking simpler books and reading them as fast as possible to the reward.

Here are some ideas:

Praise rather than reward motivation. A child who willingly makes her bed every day will benefit from praise. Studies consistently show that giving rewards when willingness already exists can diminish motivation.

Make behavioral incentives temporary. Many parents have been amazed how much a star chart can help children get interested in potty training or going to bed on time. Because the child is not internally motivated, giving a reward after a certain number of stars appear on the chart effectively establishes the habit. However, incentives need not continue once the habit has been established.

Pick rewards that matter. Instead of routinely offering material possessions, think of rewards that provide valuable experiences—extra time playing together, a trip to a museum, a later bedtime one night a week to read.

Avoid teaching children that they should be rewarded for cooperation. It’s tempting to offer a reward when we need to get our child to comply quickly. However, children’s natural ability to

collaborate with others is undermined if they get used to receiving rewards for doing what's expected.

Thinking of rewards as bad or good oversimplifies an important aspect of life. Adults often reward themselves for doing a hard task, and children can learn to manage challenges by looking forward to a positive experience. The more important goal, of course, is to experience the reward of being mindful during any activity and giving it our best.

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