

Punishments and rewards, sticks and carrots: How behaviorism is detrimental to learning and growth.

After posting about the myriad ways that classroom behavior charts are harmful to children, many teachers and therapists DMed us to ask if the use of token charts and reward-based systems is better, or if we approve of those methods.

The answer is that *any coercive behavior modification method is detrimental to the learning process.* This is true in all circumstances, and for all people: parents, teachers, and therapists.

Yesterday, I discovered a person named Alfie Kohn. He has written many books filled with research on the ways that behaviorism fails children. I ordered one of his books, called [*"Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes."*](#) I'll update you all when I start reading it.

Anyway, I went to his website, and I started reading an article he published called [*"The Risks of Rewards."*](#) In this article, he cites dozens of studies that have proven that rewards are just as harmful as punishments. **Instead of being opposites, they're two sides of the same coin.**

Instead of trying to paraphrase everything he wrote, I'll just quote most of it here:

"Studies over many years have found that behavior modification programs are rarely successful at producing lasting changes in attitudes or even behavior. **When the rewards stop, people usually return to the way they acted before the program began.** More disturbingly, researchers have recently discovered that children whose parents make frequent use of rewards tend to be less generous than their peers (Fabes et al., 1989; Grusec, 1991; Kohn 1990)."

"Indeed, extrinsic motivators do not alter the emotional or cognitive commitments that underlie behavior—at least not in a desirable direction. **A child promised a treat for learning or acting responsibly has been given every reason to stop doing so when there is no longer a reward to be gained.**"

"Research and logic suggest that punishment and rewards are not really opposites, but two sides of the same coin. Both strategies amount to ways of trying to manipulate someone's behavior—in one case, prompting the question, 'What do they want me to do, and what happens to me if I don't do it?', and in the other instance, leading a child to ask, 'What do they want me to do, and what do I get for doing it?' **Neither strategy helps children to grapple with the question, 'What kind of person do I want to be?'"**

To summarize: rewards are not effective in “training” people to behave a certain way, because once the rewards stop, people are no longer motivated to continue acting the way they were before. This creates a chronic lack of self-direction and a sense of purpose. Behaviors are no longer internally motivated, they are externally directed. People then become dependent on prompts and incentives to complete tasks.

Let’s continue with the article:

“Rewards are no more helpful at enhancing achievement than they are at fostering good values. At least two dozen studies have shown that people expecting to receive a reward for completing a task (or for doing it successfully) simply do not perform as well as those who expect nothing (Kohn, 1993)... **In general, the more cognitive sophistication and open-ended thinking that is required for a task, the worse people tend to do when they have been led to perform that task for a reward.**”

“There are several plausible explanations for this puzzling but remarkably consistent finding. The most compelling of these is that **rewards cause people to lose interest in whatever they were rewarded for doing.** This phenomenon, which has been demonstrated in scores of studies (Kohn, 1993), makes sense given that “motivation” is not a single characteristic that an individual possesses to a greater or lesser degree. Rather, intrinsic motivation (an interest in the task for its own sake) is qualitatively different from extrinsic motivation (in which completion of the task is seen chiefly as a prerequisite for obtaining something else) (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Therefore, *the question educators need to ask is not how motivated their students are, but how their students are motivated.*”

To summarize: when rewards (external motivators) are provided for the completion of interesting, inherently motivating tasks, the intrinsic motivation and interest people have in the tasks plummets. People perform better on tasks they’re interested in when they’re *not* rewarded, compared to when they are.

Now, let’s read what Kohn wrote about a study demonstrating this concept:

“In one representative study, young children were introduced to an unfamiliar beverage called kefir. Some were just asked to drink it; others were praised lavishly for doing so; a third group was promised treats if they drank enough. Those children who received either verbal or tangible rewards consumed more of the beverage than other children, as one might predict. **But a week later these children found it significantly less appealing than they did before, whereas children who were offered no rewards liked it just as much as, if not more than, they had earlier** (Birch et al., 1984). If we substitute reading or doing math or acting generously for drinking kefir, we begin to glimpse the destructive power of rewards. The data suggest that **the more we want children to *want* to do something, the more counterproductive it will be to reward them for doing it.**”

To summarize: in this study, the children who were rewarded or praised for drinking an unknown beverage drank more of it, but enjoyed it much less. Whereas, the kids who drank it and weren't rewarded liked it just as much, if not more, than they did before.

So, what does all of this mean? What is a better way to help children learn and grow? What tools should parents and teachers use when trying to foster a healthy learning environment? Kohn writes:

First, classroom management programs that rely on rewards and consequences ought to be avoided by any educator who wants students to take responsibility for their own (and others') behavior—and by any educator who places internalization of positive values ahead of mindless obedience. **The alternative to bribes and threats is to work toward creating a caring community whose members solve problems collaboratively and decide together how they want their classroom to be** (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Solomon et al., 1992).

This concept is familiar to me as a Unitarian Universalist. In our Youth groups, at conventions, and at summer camp, we create group covenants. Covenants are a list of rules/guidelines that everyone agrees on. It's an open, democratic process. Anyone who wants to add something to the covenant is able to, and the covenant itself is a living document that can be revisited and edited at a later time if need be. Every time the composition of the group changes (for example if a new session of camp starts), a new covenant is created.

Creating a classroom, a group setting, or a therapy room that involves a collaborative relationship between mentors and students, is the best way to foster healthy learning and growth. **When students are involved in setting expectations for themselves, they are more engaged and more willing to abide by the agreement.** Allowing for flexibility and change in the covenant itself also allows the rules to shift over time to fit the needs of the students.

In UU spaces, the process of accountability is not punishment or rewards based. When someone violates the covenant, trained counselors discuss the situation with them and anyone else who was involved. Then, a restorative justice model of conflict resolution is engaged. Everyone involved works together to find a solution to the problem at hand.

This isn't some unrealistic, utopian dream. It's the model of learning and growth that is most suited to the way human brains actually work. And yes, that includes autistic people.

There are many ways to engage with nonspeaking and/or intellectually disabled autistic people to ascertain what their boundaries are, what they're intrinsically motivated by, and what they care about. Creating a covenant in a classroom for autistic kids might be more

challenging from a communication standpoint, but that doesn't make it impossible. Quite honestly, not enough people are even trying.

But I hope that after reading this, you will.

~Eden 🐸