

Punished by Rewards

by Kim Olver

Do you believe in the concept of rewarding positive behavior and either punishing or ignoring negative behavior in the hopes of reinforcing the behavior you define as acceptable in your children? It's hard not to when pop psychology is based in behaviorism. Unfortunately, what you don't know is that research provides staggering evidence against this approach and the evidence actually supports the concepts behind Empowerment Parenting.

The book, *Punished by Rewards*, by Alphonse Kohn, provides a thorough review of the literature involved with using rewards to shape behavior. One of the most popular reasons this idea is perpetuated is because it works! Yes, you can get many children to do the things you want by rewarding positive behavior, particularly when you find a reward the person values. The problem is that they are only working for the reward. They have no desire to improve or increase the occurrence of the behavior you want except as it relates to them getting their reward.

What does this mean for the long-term? It means that you are not reinforcing the behavior you think you are. Once the reward is no longer offered, the research shows that the behavior will not only stop but go to an even lower frequency than was exhibited before the reward was offered.

Another thing that occurs is that when we offer rewards for behavior we want to see, the child can become dependent on the reward system and eventually it will appear that the all the child will work for are bribes. Then, we blame the child for being unmotivated when it was really our rewarding behavior that created that condition in the first place!

Another thing that Kohn tells us is that anytime we offer a reward for a specific behavior, we decrease a person's interest in the behavior we are trying to create. Sure we can get him or her to engage in the behavior to get the reward but it isn't because they like or enjoy the behavior. In fact, just the opposite occurs. Whenever we offer a child a reward, we are sending the message that the behavior we want them to engage in must be a tedious, uninteresting one or else why would we have to motivate them to perform it? We actually teach them to hate the behavior we are trying to reinforce! Talk about counter productive!

And the final reason I want to mention for not rewarding comes from the idea that we are interfering with a person's right for autonomy. We are all born with the inner desire for freedom. We don't like to be restricted or controlled. We want to determine our own destiny. This is human nature. Anytime we try to control another person's behavior, no matter how subtly, we are discounting the person's right to their autonomy. Even rewarding is a subtle attempt to control another person's behavior. The people who are most susceptible to this are those with a high need for freedom. They will smell the manipulation attempt from a mile away and will resist your attempts to control them.

Am I saying spontaneous rewards are bad? No. When we spontaneously celebrate accomplishments, there is no attempt to control. We are simply recognizing that celebration is in order when someone achieves a particular thing. The person didn't KNOW he or she would get a reward for complying so he or she didn't experience the feeling of being manipulated.

The thing that Empowerment Parenting works to create is intrinsic motivation. We were all born with a desire to accomplish things. Somewhere along the way, behaviorism and behavior modification may have decreased our internal motivation. Empowerment Parenting teaches parents how to help their children regain their sense of power by fueling internal motivation.