

A LINE ON LIFE

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Reward Children for Doing Well *

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For over 25 years, researchers have criticized rewarding the "*natural*" interests and creativity of children – activities that children do for the "*joy of it*." They have argued that giving children rewards – even praise – for these efforts reduces their exploratory and artistic interests. They say that these forms of praise lead children to achieve only the specific tasks that are rewarded. The behavior continues only as long as the rewards do.

However, psychologists Robert Eisenberger (University of Delaware) and Judy Cameron (University of Alberta) disagree. It is the *misuse* of the reward – not the reward itself – that causes the problem. If rewards are used correctly, they *do* increase children's motivation and creativity. In their view, children should be rewarded for excelling, rather than any attempt to excel.

**Rewards work best when they are linked to performing well,
not just *any* performance.**

Eisenberger and Cameron examined 96 studies conducted since 1971. These studies involved children with natural inclinations for singing, drawing, painting or other activities. The studies indicated that these activities were dropped after rewards were discontinued. Upon closer examination, they found that motivation dropped *only* when rewards were given regardless of how well the children did.

"When you reward a child for high-quality work, you send a message that they're doing a good job. The reward motivates the child to keep trying and to take pride in their work."

Other psychologists still insist that the reward takes the child's attention away from the task itself. Rather than being motivated by their own curiosity, the children's work is controlled by the reward.

Psychologist Patricia Stokes (Columbia University) does not believe that rewards for creativity are always negative. She says the studies have missed the point. Researchers have failed to indicate what kind of performance will be rewarded. Performance explanations need to be given.

For example, if you want children to be creative, they need to understand what creativity *is*. Eisenberger studied 416 fifth and sixth-graders. The children were presented with a set of objects. One group was asked to think of *unusual* uses for the objects – like using a book for a doorstop. Another group was told to just find *any* uses for the objects. Within each group, children received either no reward, a penny or a nickel for creative answers.

After this exercise, the children were asked to create pictures from a set of blank circles. The children who had received the greatest rewards in their previous training drew the most creative pictures. The least creative drawings were merely happy or sad faces. In contrast, the more creative responses involved things like eggs in a frying pan, a bedside table, a bear claw, a lock or an octopus.

To Eisenberger, the results indicated that the rewards did increase creativity. In addition, once the children understand what creativity is, they are more likely to generalize it to other tasks.

"You can't just assume children will understand what creativity is. You have to explain what it is and how you expect them to be creative."



In education, the use of rewards is extensive. For example, *Pizza Hut* has been involved in a long-standing program called **"BOOK IT."** When children reach reading goals set by their teacher, they get a free personal-size pizza. In the last school year, over 22 million children participated in the "BOOK IT" program.

Because some people disapproved of this program, psychologist Stephen Flora (Youngstown State University, Ohio) investigated it. Did the children only read to get the pizza? When no longer in the program, would their interest in reading stop?

Flora surveyed 171 college students who had been in the "BOOK IT" program. He also surveyed students whose parents had paid them to read. Students said that both rewards – pizza and money – increased their interest in reading and the amount they read. Many said the program helped them to learn how to read. Now they read for enjoyment. The programs helped them grasp the basic elements of reading, so they could continue to read for pleasure and useful information. However, Flora recommends that teachers and parents explore different rewards, until they find ones that work for the individual child.

"Verbal praise is really the best reward, but sometimes children need external rewards as well to get them motivated.... At first, a kid might read to get the pizza, later they'll read to find out who done it, or who got the girl."

If a child really enjoys any activity, no external reward is usually needed. However, if children need prompting, Eisenberger agrees that children learn best with both praise and tangible rewards. If a child excels in class, receiving a good grade is a reward, but it helps to add verbal praise. *"You've done a great job. You have earned an 'A'."* This would make the child feel good about her achievement.

Don't reinforce mere participation in activities that your children already enjoy. However, beyond material rewards, it helps to praise them when they *excel* in that activity.

* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Rewards should be given when defined goals are met," and "Verbal praise may be the best motivator of all," [*The APA Monitor*](#), June, 1997, page 26.