

# Motivating students beyond carrot and stick

How stickers and certificates can undermine students' self-direction and motivation.

Effective teaching is the basis of successful learning. Effective teaching identifies and builds on prior knowledge, makes real-life connections, develops deep understanding, and monitors and reflects on learning.

So what role does motivation have in all this?

Teachers routinely attest to the importance of motivating students, lamenting how easily students memorise unending rap songs despite needing a truckload of teaching tricks to help them remember instructions for a simple assignment.

In today's worried world it seems like many children get stickers for simply breathing in an effort to keep them motivated! It seems the negative effects of the warm fuzzy self-esteem movement from the US many years ago have confused our parents and teachers.

Have you noticed that children don't need to be given a reward for sitting down to watch a much-anticipated movie or to eat ice cream or chocolate? These are activities that come with a built-in reward, the immediate reward of positive emotion.

When I studied as an undergraduate at The University of Western Australia (UWA), I did Psychology 101. As part of our study into human behaviour we undertook a lab experiment where we used rewards to teach a cute white rat to get food by touching a lever.

The idea was that when the rat touched the lever it got food (and it was rewarded) and if it didn't touch the lever it went without. After two weeks I found my rat dead — he never learnt about how to get the food. Everyone else's rats were doing great or were overeating. I was quite upset at this death

and on reflection decided to give up psychology. I also decided that using rewards to change behaviour was not something I valued.

Fast-forward to my teaching career and my own parenting and I now realise I unconsciously avoided using external or extrinsic rewards —deeply scarred by my rat experiment, no doubt.

However, teachers and parents often encourage less desirable activities with extrinsic rewards that offer the immediate positive emotion lacking in the task. Of course this is not what we want — and that's why it is important to set the record straight. We give children chocolate and toys for contributing to housework, stickers for sitting quietly in class and grade 'A's for handing in well-written reports. However successful this type of extrinsic motivation may appear in the short-term, it presents a number of significant inhibitors to a love of life-long learning.

## The downside of rewards

I recently spoke at the 2013 Positive Schools conferences throughout Australia and was inspired by the National Australian Positive Schools Initiative's Applied Social Psychologist Helen Street's presentation on *Rewards, Punishments and Motivation*.

"Children who are continually motivated by the immediate positive emotion associated with extrinsic rewards tend to hold a limited one-dimensional idea of wellbeing," Dr Street, who is also an honorary research fellow at UWA, said, "They may also feel punished when rewards are not forthcoming. Teachers are left handing out

increasingly verbose praise until we have not only lowered the standards by which we judge our children; we have made sure that high marks are almost obligatory. 'A' becomes the first letter of average."

Research shows quite clearly that giving stamps and stickers to reward nice behaviour towards others actually increases the opposite behaviour. It decreases sympathy and empathy and makes children mean.

Dr Street likens this to the yearning for "fame, fortune" and other forms of public celebration. It can drive individuals towards those extrinsic rewards while they may secretly hate what they are doing.

The use of rewards also increases compliance and obedience, which at first sight may seem like a great idea in the classroom. Sadly in the long-term the increase in extrinsic rewards deprives individuals of their ability for self-determination.

Maybe this is why there is such massive disengagement in high school? Hormones, growth spurts, mental chaos, emotional roller coaster rides and no more stickers?

## What, no more stickers?

While as a teacher I seldom used extrinsic rewards, there was certainly a place for some rewards — the unexpected acknowledgment, the "thank you" note, the well-done lolly jar. I also confess to bribing and coercing my sons with the



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promise of chocolate, ice cream and lollies and it worked a treat. However, it was occasional and not every day.

When recently discussing the issue of rewards with two of my sons, now adults, they disagreed and said they loved extrinsic rewards and like to be rewarded for exceptional effort with more money — who doesn't? I wonder how much temperament has to do with this: the higher-energy, bolder 'roosters' value winning and being first much more than our more introverted 'lambs', so maybe this is another thing to consider in the mix?

Andrew Martin, author of *How to Motivate your Child for School and Beyond*, agrees. He writes that rewards can sometimes be used effectively with young children. They can be helpful in getting disengaged students engaged and also can be useful to sustain kids' interest in school work until the work becomes more personally interesting or enjoyable. Once a child is interested it may be best to back off the reward and offer encouragement instead.

The distinction needs to be made about inner and outer motivation with students. The art of building the “inner locus of control” for students is about lighting the fire within them rather than under them.

Essentially, kids will need bigger and bigger rewards to do what we would like them to do if they don't have an inner locus of control that gives them an intrinsic sense of positive emotion.

This is where powerful morphic fields, positive intentionality from the teacher, safe classrooms for risk-taking, and enormous amounts of enthusiasm are essential in building both overt and inherent motivation.

Author of *How Students Learn*, Barbara McCombs states that “almost everything [teachers] do in the classroom has a motivational influence on students — either positive or negative. This includes the way information is presented, the kinds of activities teachers' use, the ways teachers interact with students, the amount of choice and control given to students, and opportunities for students to work alone or in groups. Students react to who teachers are, what they do, and how comfortable they feel in the classroom”.

Based on research, we now know that motivation depends on the extent to which teachers are able to satisfy students' needs:

- to feel in control of their learning
- to feel competent, and
- to feel connected with others.

## Giving students influence

Being able to influence their own learning means students have significant input into the selection of learning goals and activities and of classroom policies and procedures. It helps students feel in control. Knowing that students need to have significant input into decisions about their learning situation does not, however, simplify the task of meshing what, when, how and where students want to learn with mandated content and objectives, the school's schedule, and the teacher's room assignment.

Fortunately, research suggests that students feel some ownership of a decision if they agree with it, so getting students to accept the reasons some aspects of a course are not negotiable is probably a worthwhile endeavour. Then, whenever possible, students should be allowed to determine class rules and procedures, set learning goals, select learning activities and assignments, and decide whether to work in groups or independently.

In addition, while inconsistent with best practice in cooperative learning, allowing students to select learning partners has been shown to improve their motivation to learn. With this, as with other instructional issues, the teacher must continually weigh the benefits of making the “preferred” instructional decision against the motivational benefits of giving students choices among appropriate alternatives.

The other side to changing behaviour is definitely discouraging what we don't want and helping our kids to become emotionally buoyant when things don't go their way.

Children and adolescents can and need to learn about setbacks — disappointment is an emotional state we all dislike and yet we can learn to deal with it.

So it seems the carrot and stick method of motivation has limited use in our schools or home — if you do X you will get Y! However we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The important message is that constant rewards can de-motivate rather than motivate.

So in a nutshell, if you give positive acknowledgement to students, you give it to all. If you give lollies — everyone gets them. That way we build that essential “belonging” while not increasing the chance of turning our students into performing monkeys. And above all, we must remember that truly effective teaching is the basis of successful learning ... and that is where the real reward lies. 🍬