

# Worth the Reward

Kaile Marlatt

**Abstract:** Rewarding children for completing tasks, or for being well behaved, can help them improve, but if rewards are improperly utilized the child and the classroom will suffer. Rewards should only be handed out for special occasions, but shouldn't be heavily utilized, because it could cause children to rely on them. Classroom studies have revealed: which types of rewards have the greatest effect on different age groups; different ways to reward to ensure the classroom is the best it can be; how children are able to learn and complete their assigned tasks; how to reward children to achieve their most efficient work.

An effective way to persuade a child to complete a task, such as potty training, behaving in school, or doing well on a test, is to reward them. Praising children in the form of rewards is a verbal technique utilized by teachers, parents and daycares to communicate to children that they are behaving properly. Giving out rewards in a tangible form is something that is regularly used, but has shown to decline a child's willingness to complete tasks. However, there have been some studies, conducted on children, which the results have shown a positive reaction to tangible rewards. This type of reward has helped improve the child's eagerness and focus in the classroom setting (Eisenberger 1996). The inconsistency of how rewards affect a child's behavior could have been caused by the accomplishments the child was rewarded for, as well as the form of reward given to the child. Another common factor to this inconsistency is that all children are different and behave differently depending on the circumstance. Students have also been praised with different rewards at home for accomplishing a similar task to those at school. Studies have produced different reward strategies to motivate children to ensure that the child is benefiting from both the reward and the situation.

Many individuals assume there is only one type of reward and each of them produces the same reaction; in reality, there are many different types

of rewards that are used to praise or encourage a child. In order to determine if a classroom is benefiting from rewards or if they are causing potential problems, one must first understand the different ways to reward a child. Noncontingent, engagement-contingent, completion-contingent, task-noncontingent and performance-contingent are all different ways to reward a child (Deci 2001). Noncontingent rewards are presented to a child when they are accomplishing tasks from their daily routine without expecting anything and receiving the reward as a surprise. This situation can occur when a child is listening very well during group time and they might be rewarded by being given the opportunity to pick their free time activity. Engagement-contingent is a type of reward given to help a child work towards a goal. Giving out candy before walking in the hall to keep students quiet is an example of this type of reward. Completion-contingent rewards are given when the goal is completed. By putting a sticker on a finished worksheet is one example. Task-noncontingent rewards occur when a child is doing a task and receives a reward that they knew they would receive after they have completed their task. An example of a task-contingent reward is bribing a child to finish a worksheet, regardless of how well they do on it. Unlike noncontingent, task-noncontingent rewards inform the child that they will be receiving a reward before they start the assignment. Performance contingent rewards occur when the child's work is impressively completed or meets a certain standard and then is rewarded. Coloring contests are one way that a performance rewards are seen on a regular basis where maybe not all children get a reward unless they do their best work. Besides the many ways to reward, there are also different rewards to give a child.

The two major ways to reward a child are by using a tangible item or a verbal reward. With younger children a tangible item is used because it can be perceived as being more effective, but in reality a tangible reward can cause a phenomenon

known as reward dependence. Reward dependence can develop in children who consistently receive a reward either tangible or verbal before or after accomplishing a task. A tangible reward can be seen as a piece of candy or a point for a party or larger reward. This type of reward is seen to lead to a decrease in a child's productivity (Eisenberger 1996). Another type of reward is a verbal reward. This type of reward is seen to be the most beneficial with young adults and adults. Saying words of encouragement is an example of a verbal reward, which can increase a person's self-esteem and help them ensure they are completing what is expected of them. Verbal rewards can also cause a person to strive for excellence, because they are being recognized by an authority figure. This type of reward can be used on children, but not many are affected as strongly as young adult and adult by a verbal reward. To a child, verbal rewards are seen as unmemorable or unimportant. Children also do not understand that they are receiving a reward and that it is just in the form of a compliment or praise. Verbal rewards can be more beneficial than tangible rewards if they are communicated enthusiastically and sincerely. The studies that have been researched by Robert E. Salvin have been conducted using a tangible reward.

Depending on how rewards are handed out determines the child's ability to properly and effectively complete tasks by themselves. Some studies by Mr. Deci have suggested that rewards can "undermine students' intrinsic motivation and performance" (Salvin 1997). Students assume that they do not need to know the information if a reward is not given to push them to learn if they have been previously given rewards regularly. When Deci conducted tests on children, his results revealed that the reward could possibly improve the child's behavior, depending on the form of the reward. Deci tested children using the unexpected and non-contingent rewards they showed no evidence of a change in their motivation or free choice behavior. Free choice behavior is choosing to voluntarily complete tasks. Deci's results on unexpected and non-contingent rewards proved that they affect the child in a negative way. Engagement-contingent and completion-

contingent also had very similar results (Deci 2001). Task-noncontingent rewards also tended to decrease the performance of children in the classroom setting. Performance contingent rewards however seemed to increase the motivation of his test subjects by 80% compared to the other types of rewards (Deci 2001). Performance rewards are shown to be the most effective way to reward a child, if the reward is given properly and in the right context.

Rewards can only be properly presented to a child if the situation is right. In the classroom many teachers reward students for doing well on tests with stickers or treats to show the child they exceeded. Clingman and Fowler conducted a study to find out if giving a reward during testing can improve overall scores. The study was focused primarily on first and second graders. They were asked if they preferred candy as a reward and if their parents permitted them to have sugar. The children who were allowed to have candy were then split into three IQ groups. Within those groups they were given either no reward, contingent reward (candy for every right answer), or noncontingent reward (candy provided during the test) (Clingman 1976). The results were inconclusive, because the students' scores did not change enough between the two tests. Only the low IQ or intelligence quality group showed a small increase in performance when given a contingent reward. Clingman and Fowler concluded that children in the two other IQ groups were already thinking at higher motivational level (Clingman 1976). Some children had a noticeable decline in performance when they were rewarded because of how it was given during the testing process.

The results of many other studies reveal that different types of rewards are harmful to children. These studies were examined by Mr. Salvin and he decided that some of the data was incorrectly obtained by leaving out a control groups in different experiments. Unlike the other groups, the control group should have received no reward for completing the same task. The results of these studies were also slanted to make it seem that all types of rewarding were unbeneficial to children. Salvin, however, pointed out some harmful effects

caused by over rewarding children. One of these effects was the children relying on the reward and having withdrawal like symptoms from not receiving a reward (Elisenberg). This would cause the child to feel that they shouldn't complete any of their assignments, because it would not result in a reward and therefore was not beneficial to them. Rewards can also alter a child's self-determination and make them feel the need to only do tasks that will help them receive a reward. A child's quality of work has also been known to decrease if they receive a reward before they have completed an action or situation, because they no longer are driven to accomplish what was expected of them.

Throughout this article I have explained that rewards can be effective or be ineffective depending on which type of reward is given and in which form they appear in. There are also many different ways to give a reward and depending on the reason for giving the reward and how the child will react to the reward will help determine the most beneficial way to reward the children. Rewards can be helpful in classrooms when children are not interested in the material, because it helps them focus through an incentive. If a child needs to be pushed to do higher quality work, a reward can possibly but not always accomplish this goal. Rewards are used to manage behavior and keep a well-run classroom. They can also be neglected and be used for power over children. Rewards can be good, bad or indifferent depending

on which technique is utilized and how often they are used. The best type of reward is a performance contingent rewards because this type of reward is utilized when a child completes average or above average work. There are many effective ways to reward children, but the most beneficial depends on the situation, the classroom environment and the child receiving the reward. Rewards if used correctly are acceptable once in a while but to have an everyday system of rewards will cause your classroom to experience challenges and not allow the children to determine their own since of purpose and complete goal on their own.

### References

- Clingman, J., & Fowler, R. L. (1976). The effects of primary reward on the IQ performance of grade-school children as a function of initial IQ level. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 9(1), 19-23.
- Deci, E. L., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R. M. (2001). Extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation in education: Reconsidered once again. *Review of educational research*, 71(1), 1-27.
- Eisenberger, R., & Cameron, J. (1996). Detrimental effects of reward: Reality or myth?. *American psychologist*, 51(11), 1153.
- Slavin, R. E. (1977). Classroom reward structure: An analytical and practical review. *Review of educational research*, 633-650.