

LETTER FROM A CONCERNED PARENT

I recently received this email from a parent. I'm sure her concerns will interest you. I contacted Jenny (not her real name as she did want her school or the teachers identified) and asked if she would agree to her letter and my reply being used in our newsletter. My thanks to Jenny for agreeing.

Dear Mr McCaskill,

I have come upon Play is the Way while trawling the internet looking for answers to issues that have come up with my own children who attend a public primary school in Perth and thought I would contact you for some information or advice.

I have twin daughters in Year One and was recently sought out by the teacher to discuss her problem with their "competitiveness" at school- not only with each other but with classmates.

They are rewarded in the classroom on multiple occasions every day for their behaviour - by receiving faction vouchers/sweets – for anything they do (from helping pack away to being nice to a friend) and my girls were comparing and 'boasting' I guess you would say. Saying things to other children such as "I have four you only have two" etc. and their teacher told me it was inappropriate and that I should speak to them about it. I agreed, but then suggested that if she removed the rewards the situation wouldn't occur and that I would rather they be taught to help in the classroom and be friendly just because it was the right thing to do. She was astounded at the suggestion and quickly dismissed it with no good reason.

The reward system at school is also having an impact at home- with my children expecting to receive something at every turn and asking what they'll get if they make their bed or pick up their things. It is very difficult to teach them that they'll get nothing apart from a thank you when their school rewards them at every turn.

One day one of my daughters spent a long time making a card for her teacher. I told her that was lovely etc and was very proud until my other daughter piped up with- "Yes, if you give her a nice drawing she lets you choose a lolly from the jar". My daughter confirmed that was the sole reason she'd made an effort. It was very upsetting.

Rewards and punishments are also used in my son's Year 3 class - with pegs on a board. If you're 'good' your peg goes up. If you're not, it's moved down. I know this is affecting the self-esteem of many in the class. Lunchtime detention is also used and given out for such minor offences as laughing in class or not 'paying attention'. In one instance my son was given detention **the day after** his terrible offence of laughing!

It is frustrating and concerning as a parent that some or most schools embrace these reward and punishment systems with such gusto with seemingly no regard to how this impacts at home and what it does to a child's sense of expectation and 'right to reward' – especially as they grow older.

I'd be very keen to hear your views on why schools persist with rewards and the problems this system creates as well as some tips for me, as a parent, on how to stop that way of thinking pervading our family life at home.

Sincerely,
Jenny L

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Dear Jenny,

I'm glad your trawling of the Internet led you to us and I hope that I can shed some light on the issues that are the cause of your frustration and concern.

Although the Australian National Curriculum requires the teaching of *personal and social capabilities* (behaviour education) a great number of schools choose to employ the practices of behaviour management.

Thankfully, an ever increasing number have embraced the challenges of social and emotional learning and with courage and commitment, regularly evaluate their practice as they journey towards the exemplary delivery of behaviour education – an education that will prepare our children to live fulfilling and meaningful lives.

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

The principal tool of behaviour management is the use of punishments and rewards. Schools using this approach usually pride themselves on well-articulated *behaviour management policies* that list the steps teachers will take to deal with difficult or inappropriate behaviour in their attempt to keep students on task. This stepping process is usually a progression of warnings that point to a punishment which the teacher hopes will be sufficiently unpleasant enough to coerce a child into compliance. Invariably, this punishment is something that isolates the child by either sitting him by himself or removing the child to a buddy class or a chair outside the principal or deputies office. Here, he will have to present a slip of paper that details his offence. The teacher's expectation is that the principal (a figure with greater authority) will mete out the appropriate punishment, thereby convincing the child that to upset the teacher is to incur the full weight of the law.

Frequently, the rewards processes are also listed and these can be quite inventive- ranging from star charts to stickers, tokens for classroom shopping, incentive plans, visits to the principal, etc. All imply that to please the teacher is well worth the effort. All require the reward to be attractive enough to the individual child, the group/team they are a part of or the class as a whole to lure the child away from the perceived benefits of behaving inappropriately, to the rewards of doing the right thing.

Many schools spend much time on their behaviour management policies and the rewards and punishments schemes that underpin those policies. Teachers take considerable pride in devising a scheme that gets children to comply and do what the teacher wants. Unfortunately, they also gain considerable pride and pleasure when other teachers, impressed by the scheme's effectiveness, adopt and use it.

CARROTS AND STICKS

Artificial inducements to motivate and control people have been around a long time and there would be few parents of today's school children who were not brought up with the strategy of: *Do this and you will get that*. And there would be few parents or children of today or yesterday who are not or did not train the family pet the same way.

Rewards and punishments are simply a carrot and stick means of behaviour management and are manipulative at best and coercive at worst. Sadly, they work in the short run and offer teachers the

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reward of temporary compliance. Most of us have a price, and presented with the right bribe or threat of pain, we will break and comply with whomever has that power over us. More sadly, considerable research confirms that these techniques ultimately fail and do lasting harm.

This *rewards and punishments* approach to the raising and teaching of children, along with our unshakable belief in its ability to embed appropriate behaviour, has been around for so long and been such an influential idea that it feels like common sense. We do not question it, even with the glaring contradiction that if it were a successful means to embed appropriate behaviour, then there would be a time when it would no longer be necessary. Yet, in almost all schools using rewards and punishments to positively influence behaviour, every student is subject to the process irrespective of their age. Furthermore, any suggestion that teachers test its effectiveness by removing it is met with nervousness and frequent hostility.

To quote, Alfie Kohn whose book *PUNISHED BY REWARDS* should be a must read for all educators (and I strongly recommend that you read it yourself and then donate the copy to your children's school), "We are not in control of the idea, it is in control of us."

In my observation, the constant use of this damaging idea prompts children to escape from the personal disempowerment it creates (after all no one likes doing what they are told, no matter how sugar coated the demand) and over time they have manipulated the shoe onto the other foot. No longer is it a case of, do this and you will get that, in many instances it has become, *I'll only do this if you'll give me that*. Any system of rewards and punishments, is open to being manipulated to the advantage of the intended targets of the system - something your daughter, not surprisingly, did in her quest to get a lolly by making a card for her teacher.

AUTHORITY DEPENDENT CHILDREN

For as long as we have been using systems of behaviour management and not behaviour education we have been producing, much to the detriment of their lives, our communities and our country, *authority dependent children*. And let me say, as forcefully as I can, it has got to stop!

Let me define the characteristics of authority dependent children.

1. Authority dependent children believe it is the teacher's job to always try to control them. To these children, control means the teacher making things easier for herself by making things harder for them.
2. Their behaviour is primarily motivated by the lure of praise and rewards or by the fear of punishment.
3. Those who respond to praise and rewards seek significance by continually trying to please the teacher. They do things like advise their teacher of the things they have done or about to do so that she will be obliged to praise or reward them for.

Examples.

One

Student: Excuse me Miss Jones, I found an ice cream wrapper on the ground and put it in the bin.

Teacher: Oh wow! How lovely of you to look after our school. Well done!

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(The child leaves feeling special and uplifted by this experience but the buzz soon dies off, leaving the child a little flat and wanting more. The opportunity to please the teacher presents itself and the child secures the attention of the teacher again).

Student: Miss Jones, Miss Jones, I was sitting with John and he started to get a headache, so I took him to the office and told Mrs Roberts.

Teacher: Well that was very considerate of you. What a fantastic friend you are. Remind me when we get back to class to give you a “friendly” sticker.

Student: Thank you. Do you want me to carry that book for you?

Teacher: No, that's all right. I can carry it, but thank you for asking.

Student: Awww *(The student feigns being upset, drops her head and begins to walk away).*

Teacher: Actually, you could take it to the staff room for me and give it to Mr Evans if you like?

Student: Okay

Teacher: Thank you. Don't forget to remind me about the sticker.

(The student runs off smiling and the teacher gets a little buzz from knowing that the student really wanted to please her and that she, in turn, could make the student happy).

Two

Teacher: Now, who will I pick to be at the front of the line? *(A handful of students sit as straight as they can like little soldiers with chests puffed out, arms crossed and mouths tightly closed to prove they aren't talking).* Oooo, I really like the way Adam is sitting. He is setting a fantastic example. *(The teacher says this in the hope that other children will follow suit in the attempt to please her and be publicly heralded for doing so).* Thank you David, you're awesome and so are you Alex. Thank you boys and girls. You're all sitting beautifully and that makes me very happy. Adam, you and Terri can lead the class to the library and on the way over I will choose the two people who are being as quite as mice and they can lead the line when we come back from the library.

(Once the class reaches the library the teacher maintains her control by telling the class that so many of them walked over beautifully that she simply can't pick two leaders for the line back. So, she will have to ask the librarian to keep an eye out for the best little busy bees and between the two of them they will select two special children to lead the line. Desperate to be line leaders, a group of children spend the entire library period trying to please the librarian).

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4. Those children, who do not respond to the lure of praise and rewards, seek equal significance by continually trying to upset the teacher.

Let me follow through on the above example.

Danny did nothing but mess around in the line as the class walked to the library. His teacher repeated his name numerous times with increasing volume and annoyance. She threatened him with the possibility that he might not be chosen to lead the line on the way back, and that instead of participating in the library period he was well on his way to being sent to his buddy class.

Upon arrival at the library, his teacher advised the librarian that the class had been wonderful as they walked over but Danny had spoilt things for everyone by making bad choices. The librarian promised to keep an eye on him.

During the library period, Danny's behaviour got worse and he was isolated at a table right next to the librarian's. In the final ten minutes of the class he was told that if he was ready to be sensible he could join his class group and work on their project. He did so, and much to the surprise and resentment of many in the class, was rewarded for his last minute decision to behave appropriately. He was allowed to select someone he thought had been behaving really well to join him in leading the class back to their room.

5. Authority dependent children who respond to the lure of praise and rewards enjoy the control imposed upon them as it reduces the demands and challenges of self-management – an essential requirement to function effectively in life and learning.
6. Authority dependent children who do not respond to the lure of praise and rewards resent the authority figure imposing the control while simultaneously needing that control to function effectively and appropriately. They determine that if a teacher is not powerful enough to keep them in control, then he or she deserves to be treated with contempt. If the teacher is powerful enough, then he or she is to be feared (often seen as respect by teachers) and is deserving of both compliance and resentment. Such children are caught between a rock and a hard place.

OUTCOME DETERMINES PRACTICE

The National Curriculum asks educators to develop self-motivated, self-regulating, independent, life long learners. Parents need to be asking schools how the use of rewards (verbal or material) achieves this and what research and/or evidence they are using to validate this practice.

It is a really important question to ask because vast quantities of research point to the fact that rewards diminish long term motivation, turn children off learning, lower the quality of their work and adversely affect the quality of the relationship they have with their teachers.

During their training, student teachers are told of the need to develop intrinsic motivation. They learn that the reward of learning is learning itself. They know that to develop life long learners they need to create a love of learning, not an addiction to rewards and praise. They know that temporary compliance is not the goal and that ongoing self-management is. They are encouraged to inspire and excite children about learning not prod, cajole and coerce them into doing as they are told. They are trained to create engaging and rewarding lesson plans that enrich the whole child. They learn little if anything about the strategies and tricks of external motivation, control and compliance.

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Then as part of their training they do practicum sessions in schools and it is here that the sheltered hot house of institutionalised training meets the reality of the classroom. Here they will meet the experienced professional who, in all likelihood, will introduce them to a variety of effective carrot and stick (rewards and consequences) approaches to the controlling of classrooms and the management of children. And as this seasoned professional will be marking the trainee, it is important the trainee does as he or she is told and employs whatever strategies they are asked to - regardless of the fact that it may contradict the latest research and evidence.

PROVE IT

The most frequent rationale I hear for the use of rewards is that it helps to set good habits of learning as well as those of personal and social behaviour. Some teachers will also say it also helps to set the rules.

If this is true, then it goes without saying that at some point the rewards have to stop. Without stopping the rewards there is no way of seeing if habits have in fact been established. If the purpose is to use rewards to embed desired behaviours then their success at doing so means they can be stopped, and the behaviour (because it has been embedded) will continue. There is simply no way out of this argument.

However the reality is somewhat different. In every year of primary school, in the great majority of schools, rewards and incentive schemes form a significant part of the classroom management system for all year levels. Think of your own children and I would be fairly safe in suggesting that reward systems are used in the same volume and with the same intensity in your son's year 3 class as in the year 1 class of your daughters.

Logic alone would indicate that if rewards had successfully imbedded some of the appropriate personal, social and learning behaviours of your son when he was in year 1, fewer and with less frequency would have been needed in year 2. And now that he is in year 3, you would have thought that if rewards were the extremely effective tool teachers proclaim them to be, your son would be busily and happily learning in a classroom driven by nothing other than his own motivation and love of learning.

I am reminded of a quote an insightful principal passed on to me. Apparently it is from the cartoon strip Dagwood. "A lot of things make a lot of sense until you really think about them." When comes to the use of rewards this quote resonates strongly.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Sadly, the more a school uses rewards the more likely it is to use punishments...and the more excessive the rewards the more severe the punishments. This is understandable because if your best rewards (pleasure) won't work to get you what you want, then you have little option but to go the opposite end of the scale and use punishment (pain).

Schools are not comfortable with punishing children or at least to be seen doing so. Yet they have little option if their reward systems are to have value and effect. There is no ying without yang and no pleasure without the possibility of pain. This idea is so disturbing that in modern education the word *consequence* is used as a euphemism for punishment. In calling it so, teachers can comfort

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themselves with the belief that whatever pain they inflict on children, the children brought upon themselves.

This is not only convenient it is also erroneous. The decision to hurt a child who is doing the wrong thing will always be the teacher's or the school's to make.

AUTHORITY DEPENDENT TEACHERS

In my opinion there is little chance of significant change in this area until schools make the big leap and accept that *behaviour education* and not *behaviour management* is both their moral and professional obligation.

This won't happen until we address the issue of authority dependent teachers.

Authority dependent teachers are those who, lacking the knowledge and skills of behaviour education, feel disempowered and unable (perhaps unwilling) to address the unacceptable, though often normal, behaviour of students.

Feeling disempowered, these teachers are quick to send misbehaving students out of the classroom and onto a higher authority (principal or deputy) in the expectation that fear of the person in authority (the boss) and the punishment they inflict will convince the child to behave in the presence of the teacher (the servant). Typically, these teachers are quick to quiz the principal or deputy about how he or she punished the child and are rarely satisfied with the severity of what was done.

Few principals are comfortable with children being sent out of classrooms and many accept the practice to appease teachers who, believing in behaviour management, expect the highest figure of authority to manage it.

CONNECTIONS

School leaders understand that strong teacher/student connections facilitate learning and that removing children from classrooms damages that connection. They also know how disempowered children feel when sent to them. Arriving with a little coloured slip of paper, that succinctly details his offence, the child knows that reasons and explanations for what he has done will have little influence on the principal. If it did, the principal will be seen to be backing the child over the teacher and that simply can't happen. He is guilty as charged and any part the teacher may have played in exacerbating the situation will not be explored, or allowed to influence the teacher's right to justice being done.

However principals are, as I said earlier, uncomfortable with the inequity of the situation and usually spend time connecting with the child while isolating him in some part of the office. More often than not, the length of time before the child returns to the classroom has more to do with when the teacher is ready than when the child is. It is not uncommon for this practice to create strong connections between the principal and the "difficult" child who, in sensing that connection and valuing its importance, finds ways to regularly be removed from the classroom and sent back to the only person who understands and accepts him.

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REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS

Another feature of authority dependent teachers is their interpretation of the teacher/student relationship as that of, master and servant. Although they may not explicitly say it, their expectation is that students should be obedient, do as they are told and comply with the wishes of the teacher. Hence, they fail to see that any punishment damages the relationship between the teacher and the student. Believing that the student deserved what they got, the teacher leaves it to the student to work his way back into the teacher's favour, instead of actively repairing the relationship and bringing it back onto the even keel of mutual respect and understanding.

I would be interested to know if the teacher who punished your son, a day after his offence, bothered to repair the relationship. My suspicion is that with the punishment done, the situation was deemed as over, and your son was just expected to put aside all his feelings of resentment and hurt and quickly get back to finding ways to please the teacher. I would also be interested in knowing if your son received a reward in the afternoon of his lunchtime detention or the day after.

As a parent I hope you see the need to bring your children closer to you when they are going wrong. It's when things are not working out that they need guidance the most, and when they have little self-control that they need your assistance to find it. Hopefully, it would not cross your mind to cast your children aside because they failed to live up to your expectations. Hopefully, you know that a sense of physical and emotional security and a sense of belonging are the pre-requisites for personal change. So it is for classrooms.

BEHAVIOUR EDUCATION

Ask teachers if they would punish a child who failed to understand a mathematical concept and they will all say, no. Ask them if can envisage punishing a child who repeatedly made the same mistake in maths or kept spelling a word incorrectly and they answer, no. Ask them if they can imagine a time when they would punish a child for being academically or intellectually unable, inept, undeveloped or inferior to their peers and they would answer, no. Ask them if they would offer the child more education or more punishment to improve his or her capabilities and they will, in one voice say, more education.

Not so with personal and social capabilities. The very fact that the curriculum calls them capabilities indicates they can be taught. Yet in thousands of classrooms throughout this country, including those of your children, the accepted practice for developing personal and social capabilities is the use of punishments and rewards. *Behaviour* (personal and social capabilities) is not seen as a subject that can be learnt and mastered, and it is certainly not afforded the status of any subject that you would care to mention.

When it comes to behaviour we train our children as we do our pets, and then wonder why it is that they all too frequently fail to fulfil their potential as young human beings.

It has to stop and perhaps when parents like you ask schools to validate this practice with research and evidence, they may just take a closer look at what they are doing and decide that our children deserve much more than the manipulative techniques of behaviour management – that they do in fact, deserve teachers skilled in social and emotional learning with a deep interest in developing character as well as capacity.

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THE BEST THING TO DO

May I strongly recommend that you read my book *CHILDREN AREN'T MADE OF CHINA*. It was written to facilitate a common understanding and approach between parents and teachers to help both parties tackle the task of social and emotional development.

You could also suggest that your school visit our lighthouse school, Tapping Primary, here in WA or at least consider visiting their website <http://www.tappingps.wa.edu.au>

Tapping Primary School, under the guidance of its principal, Bill Boylan, uses Play Is The Way as its behaviour education process and the entire student population (850 students) functions without being subjected to the manipulative or coercive techniques of behaviour management.

Finally, stick to your guns and if it has not been the way of your family to manipulate children with the lure of praise and rewards then don't start now. Far better that your children do the right thing because they believe it is the best thing to do than do it to avoid getting into trouble or because they will get something for it. The latter reasons are self-serving and the lowest level of moral reasoning. I suspect that it is very important to you to raise children of good character and decency. It doesn't happen by accident.

Kind regards,

Wilson