

# STOP REWARDING AND PUNISHING KIDS UNDER THE BANNER OF EDUCATION

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By Bill Boylan

At Tapping Primary School we do not use rewards, punishments or unwarranted praise to manipulate student behaviour. We want students to become self-motivated learners and therefore remove any practice from the school that works against this vision. Is there any school leader that would argue the contrary and rather have students leave their schools as authority dependent learners? Yet the idea of using rewards, punishments and praise to control students is so widely shared that we no longer even notice it. In fact, it is so entrenched that it feels like plain common sense to us.

Most schools have a Behaviour Management Policy. The title itself implies that students must be managed and controlled. At Tapping, the policy is referred to as Behaviour Education and Self-Management. We are educators; we need to educate. Behaviour should be treated in the same manner as Mathematics, English or other curriculum areas. If a student is stuck on a particularly difficult problem in Mathematics does the threat of punishment or the promise of reward help the student to solve the problem? Why then is this our major strategy when dealing with student behaviour?

Like other areas of learning, behaviour is shaped by the sum total of regular and frequent lessons that create small but meaningful changes over a long and sustained period of time. It takes effort and patience to work respectfully with children to develop skills of self-control and a commitment to behaving responsibly. It takes no time, no effort, no talent and no patience to simply announce, "Do this and I will give you that."

The research around offering rewards or using punishments to produce lasting change indicates that it fails miserably. It rarely produces the desired result because it does not alter the attitudes and emotional commitments that underlie behaviour. Rewards and punishments will get obedience and short-term compliance. However, if the objective is to develop careful thinkers with good values who can maintain positive relationships and are persistently self-motivated,

then rewards and punishments are virtually useless. *Do this and you will get that*; turns out to be bad news whether our goal is to change behaviour or to improve performance.

Supporters of the push for harsher penalties for students who misbehave usually make the argument that in the real world if you rob a bank you will go to gaol or if you speed you will get a fine. So, our kids had better get used to being punished at school or home if they cross the line. This kind of thinking not only develops the lowest form of moral reasoning in our children, it also teaches them to only act in self-interest. Surely we are obliged to help children develop a moral compass?

We want our children growing up and not speeding because they realise speeding could get themselves or others killed. They realise the deep ramifications of their actions and it is this that has them behaving responsibly and not the fear of a fine or of getting caught. Unlike authority dependent children, who believe it is only wrong if they caught; independent, self-motivated, self-managing children do the right thing because they believe it is the best thing to do. They can make themselves do the right thing even if they don't feel like it and when no authority figure is making them.

Further more, how does this punishment/reward ideology play out in the real world? Will someone follow our kids around when they get older and continuously reward or punish them to ensure their behaviour complies with community expectations? As educators we must direct our considerable teaching skills towards the behaviour education that helps children make their contribution to shaping a safe and secure world.

If we are concerned about what kind of people our children will become then there are no shortcuts. Good values have to be grown from the inside out. Rewards and punishments can change behaviour for a while but they cannot change the person that engages in the behaviour. No behaviour manipulation ever helped a child develop a commitment to be becoming a caring and responsible person. No reward for doing something we approve of ever gave a child a reason for repeating that action other than the desire for the reward itself.

The use of bribery and threats gives us a false sense of security. Deep down we know they don't work, if only because we spend so much time and effort in the futile pursuit and implementation

of supposedly better ways to bribe and threaten our children. We want our children under our control and are disturbed by the fact that if rewards and punishments really did work we wouldn't have to keep using them.

It is time for behaviour education, not behaviour management. It is time to educate in all subject areas, including the subject of personal and social capabilities (behaviour); which Tapping Primary School considers is the most important subject of all because it is the subject, which affects all others.

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