

Moving Beyond Rewards and Punishments

OUR NEIGHBORHOOD CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER



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Most people were raised with some form of the reward-punishment model of discipline. Our caregivers rewarded us with their praise, food, or material things when we did what they liked or thought was good. When we didn't do what the caregiver wanted, made a mistake, or struggled we were punished with disapproval, by removal of material things, physically, or through a loss of attention and love. Our caregivers used rewards and punishments to manipulate our behaviors to try to get us to do what was right, good, or pleasing to them. This was a long standing model but now we know more about how children's brains work and we can reject this model for another way that better serves children.

Reflecting on Your View of Rewards and Punishments

- Thinking back to your childhood, how were rewards and punishments implemented? What important discipline or learning moments can you remember from your childhood? Were rewards or punishments present in those moments? Were you learning what the adult intended?
- How do you manage your behavior as an adult? How do you motivate yourself? How do reward or punishment structures in your world impact you? Do any reward or punishment structures overtly affect your decision making? What subtle rewards and punishments might impact you even unknowingly?
- What do you think is the most effective way to manage behaviors in a civil society? What are the roles of authority figures (policy, policymakers, church leaders, grandparents, etc)? How effective do you believe reward systems are in impacting behaviors? In what situations are punishments are justified? How do your beliefs about society extend to your beliefs about children? What is the role of caregivers?

Our Philosophy: There is no misbehavior. Children are behaving however they can to meet their needs. Children will learn to make decisions when they have a safe context in which to make decisions, make mistakes, and reflect. The caregiver's role is to teach; rewards and punishments interfere with teaching.

What We Believe

- Situations and relationships, not rules, govern behavior.
- Decision making and critical thinking skills take a long time to develop, so start early.
- Logic works. We are logical beings and if you talk to and respect children they will understand.
- Intrinsic motivation is stronger and healthier than extrinsic motivation.

	Low Expectations	High Expectations
Low Support	<u>Neglectful Parenting</u> – Children have no expectations for their behavior and no support. Caregivers are absent and indifferent without much regard for or expectations of children.	<u>Authoritative Parenting</u> – Children have high difficult to achieve expectations and not much support to meet them. Caregivers demand children meet expectations.
High Support	<u>Permissive Parenting</u> – Children have little or no expectation for their behavior and lots of support. Caregivers do for children, follow children's whims, and prevent children from experiencing any struggle.	<u>Authoritative Parenting</u> – Children have high expectations for their behavior but they have a lot of support to meet adult expectations. Caregivers explain, coach, listen, empathize, and problem solve but maintain expectations.

Research Finds: Children succeed when they have high expectations for behavior and a high level of caregiver support.

Reflecting on the Impacts of the Reward and Punishment Model

The reward-punishment model of behavior management continues as the primary method largely because adults rarely get a chance to pause and consider how it is not serving children.

Rewards and Punishments Add Stress

When children are working to learn a new skill, having a conflict, or trying to navigate their world and an adult comes in with a reward or punishment to manipulate their decision that adds to the stress of the situation. Now the stakes of something a child was working on just became even bigger. Adding a reward or punishment is like doubling down.

Stress decreases our ability to access our thinking reasoning brain thus decreasing problem solving and learning capacity.

Rewards and Punishments Do Not Teach

Misbehavior is missing skills.

A child that is punished for choosing not to do what a caregiver asks, making a mistake, or struggling does not learn how to make a different choice the next time. A punishment doesn't teach children our values or help children learn a missing skill that would reshape their decision when faced with similar problems. Similarly, rewards offer no value in terms of teaching. Rewarding children's good decisions or success does not help children learn what 'good' is or why something is 'good' and rewards don't provide children insight into their success to help them replicate it. Children are taught to follow rules instead of reasoning.

Questioning and thinking about problems is not encouraged in a reward punishment structure.

Rewards and Punishments Use Extrinsic Motivation

When a reward or punishment is used by a caregiver it affects the child's decision making. Children may change their decision to try to get a reward or avoid a punishment. This changes children's attention toward making decisions base on extrinsic rewards and punishments when we really want children to focus on values. As we consider our long-term goals for children we can see rewards and punishments erode children's development of sound decision making skills. Learning to make decisions based on extrinsic motivators puts someone else in control of decisions. Perhaps when children are young, decisions are made based on parental or school reward systems but as children grow older they will face extrinsic motivators from other influences, peers, gangs, and marketing campaigns. Children won't have learned to make a decision based on values, but instead based on the biggest reward or avoiding the punishment. Ultimately extrinsic motivators are not as strong as intrinsic motivation.

If we teach children values, reflection, and sound decision making they will be better able to face future challenges and decisions connected to their intrinsic motivators.

Rewards and Punishments Disconnect Us

Disconnection increases misguided and disruptive behaviors

When a trusting adult imposes rewards or punishments it adds distance to the adult-child relationship. The reward punishment model uses power over children placing the child and adult at odds. It is attempting to motivate children through fear, either the fear of a punishment or the loss of a reward, often including love or acceptance. The trusting relationship children use to choose to be helpful is now threatened. When a child is questioning a decision, has made a mistake, or needs help, they may not go to the trusting adult because they fear the removal of a reward or implementation of a punishment. Disconnected children are less able to problem solve and face the stressors of life.