
THE RESULTS OF REWARDS

by Lois Ingber, L.C.S.W.

OBJECTIVE: To demonstrate that rewards, like punishments, interfere with discipline as teaching. (Can be done immediately following the “Results of Punishment” Activity.)	MATERIALS: No materials needed.
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COMMENT: Not feeling entirely comfortable with the use of punishments, many parents and teachers turn to the use of rewards, or perhaps use both. With concerns about child abuse, as a society we are moving away from the practice of punishments, especially physical punishments, and have instead replaced it with the practice of rewards, believing it is more “kind” to the child. Yet, rewards fail to achieve the adult’s goal: to encourage a sense of responsibility and accountability in the child, and instead create self-centeredness and loss of mutual respect.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Ask for a volunteer. Stand in front of the person and say, “Pretend I am your spouse or partner.” Then say, “I’ve come up with a new plan! For every night you cook dinner, I’m going to give you a sticker! We’ll place the stickers on a chart and at the end of the month, if you fill up the chart, you can have a reward! What would you like it to be?” (Go with their choice if it is something you agree with, or bargain an alternative.)

2. Ask the volunteer to process what s/he was feeling, thinking and deciding. Ask the person, “Are you learning to cook dinner? Why or why not?” If the person did not agree to the plan, process their choice. (*This part of the activity is designed to show that rewards are used for control and introduce into the relationship roles of superior and inferior. Draw out these concepts during processing.*)

3. Ask for another volunteer. Stand in front of them and say, “If I give you \$100, would you take off your shoes?” If they do it, pretend handing them the money. If they don’t agree but ask for more money, agree to it. Then, process feelings, thoughts and decisions. Ask the volunteer, “Did I teach you to take off your shoes? Why or why not? What appealed to you?”

If the volunteer didn’t agree to the offer, ask, “Could you please explain your choice?” If not offered in the explanation, ask for feelings, thoughts and decisions about this choice. (*This part of the activity is designed to show that rewards teach people to look for the payoff, rather than doing a task for its own sake. It also shows that the child thinks of rewards differently than we intend them to: that rewards are really for the ‘giver,’ i.e., “If you give me something I want, parent or teacher, I will reward you with the task you are asking of me.”*)

4. Discuss with the group their reactions, what they are learning.

5. Give handout “The Results of Rewards” and discuss.

FURTHER DISCUSSION (Can be read to the group, or highlight the points and discuss).

There is a little understood dynamic that occurs with the use of rewards. By “Doing To” vs. “Doing With” the child, rewards establish a superior/inferior relationship creating a double bind for the child. Since the reward is appealing to the child, by accepting the plan the child agrees to be placed in an inferior position, relinquishing (prostituting) her dignity and self-respect. If she does not agree to the plan, thereby retaining her dignity and self-respect, she misses out on something she would enjoy and risks disappointing the adult or making the situation worse for herself by the adult. She cannot “win” in either scenario. The child loses respect for both the adult and herself. This is why rewards fail in the long run: because no one can stand to be in the one-down position without compensating in some other way, usually through misbehavior, wanting a greater reward to make it more worthwhile, etc. And all this occurs subconsciously, making it difficult for children (or adults) to sort out what is actually going on.

The above dynamic can be described as a manipulation in which the child and the adult agree to both be manipulated and to manipulate as they each negotiate to get what they want. It is a model which teaches self-interest vs. genuine contribution, cooperation and problem solving to meet the needs of the situation, the key to social interest, socially useful belonging and behavior, and the betterment of the world.

The other concern is the message conveyed by the reward about the task or chore. By making the reward the focus of plan, the task or chore is cheapened, de-valued or degraded. It robs children of the opportunity to feel capable and responsible for the contribution they can make by doing something important and useful.