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Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

In this handout, praise refers to both verbal (e.g., "Nice job!") and nonverbal (e.g., a warm smile, fist bump, or high five) expressions of attention and approval. Praise typically follows a desired behavior and occurs in a natural, spontaneous manner. That is, students are not told that they have to earn praise. Further, they seldom tire of being praised, especially when it is provided in a variety of ways. Rewards refer to tangible objects (e.g., sticker, toy, or snack) and to preferred activities and privileges (e.g., extra recess, free time, or screen time). Students may also earn points, tokens, or tickets that can be exchanged for these rewards. Although rewards can—and sometimes should—be given spontaneously, they are more often used in a planned or contrived manner.

Teachers, parents, and other educators use praise and rewards to help teach students new behaviors and to maintain or strengthen existing ones. There are other important reasons, however, to use praise and rewards (Bear, 2010, 2013; Brophy, 1981). In part, they help to build positive relationships between students and others using and receiving praise and rewards, whether in the classroom or at home. The most effective teachers and parents use praise often—and rewards more occasionally—to demonstrate warmth, care, and support. For example, a teacher may compliment a student for being kind to his peers, while a parent may surprise her daughter with a special treat after she completes her homework.

Often, adults focus on students' misbehaviors or mistakes and subsequently mete out punitive consequences. This is not, however, a necessarily effective way to create long-lasting behavioral change or to promote feelings of competency and self-worth. By using praise and rewards wisely and strategically, following recommendations in this handout, adults instead "catch children being good" and place the emphasis on students' use of desirable, socially important behaviors. This approach helps students understand what they *should* do and *why* (versus simply what they *shouldn't* do) and fosters more pleasant school and home environments for everyone.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF PRAISE AND REWARDS

A wealth of research exists on praise and rewards and the multiple factors that influence their use and effectiveness (see Brophy, 1981; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In this section, three major factors are briefly discussed: student preferences, appropriate implementation of praise and rewards, and times when rewards might be harmful.

Student Preferences
The effectiveness of praise and rewards varies from student to student, both across and within age groups, and depends on individual preferences, especially with rewards. For example, adults may assume that students like to be publicly praised. The opposite can be true, however; some students prefer more private praise, especially as they get older (e.g., they are embarrassed to stick out, or worry their peers will perceive them as too good).

In addition, whereas most students like rewards, there can be wide variation in what appeals to the

student—the same reward, no matter how exciting it may seem, will not necessarily motivate two different students. For adults, the challenge is matching the reward with the student's likes and interests. This can be difficult because reward preferences often shift over time (e.g., the novelty of the reward may diminish). In addition, the ideal rewards may not be reasonable or available (e.g., something expensive). At the classroom level, teachers need to identify a reward that every student in the class likes, at least to some degree. If a reward is of little interest to the student or class, it's unlikely to have much effect, especially on increasing a behavior among students who lack self-motivation.

Appropriate Implementation of Praise and Rewards
Adults need to consider how they use praise and rewards—not all are worthwhile. For example, most people have experienced "faint praise," such as, "You did well, compared to others," when everyone else did poorly; or "Good job," when said insincerely under someone's breath. Rewards can likewise be ineffective, such as giving a child a prize or treat regardless of his or her behavior. Worse yet, they can be harmful: When an adult responds to a tantrum by meeting a child's demands, the negative behavior is rewarded, and thus strengthened.

In addition, the use of praise and rewards can range from simple or general classroom practices to complex interventions. It is important to implement the right level of praise and rewards, so adults need to adjust their use based on situational factors. For example, when praise and rewards are part of an intervention designed to reduce serious or chronic problems—and to replace them with more appropriate behaviors—adults should consider the need for a more formalized, written plan. This might consist of a behavioral contract, a daily report card, or a behavioral intervention plan.

Times When Rewards Might Be Harmful
Most books on classroom management and parenting recommend the use of rewards. However, some popular books are critical of them, especially tangible rewards (e.g., Kohn, 1999). The case for or against rewards is complex, but in general, research shows that under *certain* conditions, rewards may harm intrinsic motivation and promote extrinsic motivation (Bear, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

With intrinsic motivation, a behavior occurs because the student enjoys it, values it, and chooses it without pressure to do so. Teachers and parents

work to develop intrinsically motivated students—students who are kind to others because they value kindness; who do not bully others because it is hurtful; and who follow rules out of respect for others and an appreciation of their necessity. With extrinsic motivation, external forces (including rewards or the fear of punishment) drive a behavior. That is, the student exhibits the behavior only or primarily when a reward or punishment is expected.

One condition that affects intrinsic motivation occurs when students perceive adults as controlling or manipulating their behavior with the promise of rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Another condition is when adults compare students (e.g., "Kabir earned five points but you only earned two."). In addition to affecting intrinsic motivation, these conditions can cause harm in two other ways. First, students can develop self-centered moral reasoning, which is a belief that people only act for personal gain or to avoid punishment (e.g., "Don't steal because you could get caught and go to jail."). Second, students—especially adolescents—rebel against constant control or comparison to others. This may hurt the adult's relationship with the student or lead to more significant misbehaviors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section begins with general recommendations for the use of praise and rewards. They are followed by more specific recommendations that help avoid the development of extrinsic motivation and self-centered moral reasoning.

General Recommendations on the Use of Praise and Rewards

1. ***Use praise and rewards more than punishment.*** Focus on teaching and reinforcing desired behaviors rather than on punishing undesired ones. It's okay to do both but make sure the number of times the student is praised or rewarded greatly outweighs the number of times the student receives a negative consequence. For example, for each negative comment, such as a criticism or redirection, aim to provide the student with four positive comments.
2. ***Use praise more than rewards.*** Praise has several advantages over rewards. It occurs more naturally in most environments and is easier to use. It requires no cost and little time. In

addition, students rarely view praise as a way that adults attempt to control or manipulate their behavior (although this is more of a concern with adolescents than with younger students).

3. ***Be sincere and credible.*** Insincere or "faint" praise can do more harm than good, leading the student to think, "She said I did well but she doesn't really mean it." Credibility is also important: When the student trusts or respects an adult, the praise is more likely to be accepted and internalized. Therefore, occasional praise from someone who is valued is more effective than frequent praise from someone who is neither sincere nor respected. How a teacher or parent acts when rewarding the student is important, too—a reward is much more meaningful when given with a smile rather than with a frown.

4. ***Use frequent, immediate praise and rewards to teach a new behavior or to increase a behavior that seldom occurs.*** It is important to provide feedback to the student as soon as the desired behavior occurs—and to do so often. This helps the student recognize the importance of the behavior; it also helps the student feel successful, thus building competency. Although appropriate at all ages, frequent and immediate praise and rewards are especially important for young children and other students whose cognitive or social–emotional functioning is at the preschool or early elementary level.

5. ***Provide less praise and fewer rewards when a behavior is more established.*** Praise and rewards remain most effective if they are provided intermittently, where the length of time between them can be increased as the behavior strengthens, a process called fading. The purpose of fading is to reduce dependency on the praise or reward. Fading could include, for instance, the shift from a tangible reward to frequent praise, and then to less frequent and more random praise. Hopefully the behavior becomes driven by intrinsic factors or simply occurs out of habit.

   The rate of fading is important. Try not to fade the praise or rewards too quickly or too slowly. If it occurs too quickly, the behavior may never be truly learned or reinforced. If it occurs too slowly, the student may become too dependent on extrinsic means of motivation. In addition, even though you may not continue to use rewards, it is important to always use *some* level of praise with students.

6. ***Set appropriate and realistic goals.*** The levels at which praise or rewards are given to the student

for meeting expectations should be neither too low *nor* too high. If the threshold for positive feedback is set too low, you may convey that you do not believe the student is capable of something more. However, praising or rewarding expectations that are too high can make students feel that they never reach them. Remember that goals need to be set individually—what is easily achievable for one student may be a challenge for another. Goals can also be readjusted as the student begins to display the desired behavior more frequently.

7. ***Don't praise and reward poor effort or performance.*** Praising or rewarding poor effort or performance may reinforce it. There is a misconception that a student's self-esteem will suffer if adults withhold praise or rewards because of poor effort or performance. However, the opposite is likely to occur: Praising or rewarding at these times can communicate low expectations, thus affecting a student's confidence. In addition, if students recognize that they did not do well, they may view the positive feedback as disingenuous (even if the adult's intent was good).

8. ***Mix it up! Use different types of praise and rewards.*** There are many ways to communicate "Good job!" and to show you are pleased with the student's behavior (e.g., verbally or nonverbally). Be creative—students enjoy novelty and surprise. Using the same forms of praise and rewards over and over can cause them to become stale and ineffective.

9. ***Highlight the student's specific skills or achievement—and especially the effort demonstrated.*** Use praise or rewards to affirm something concrete and avoid using only general statements (e.g., "Good job!"). For instance, instead of saying, "I like your essay," be more specific and recognize the student's effort: "Wow, you worked really hard on this and improved your grade by 20 points. I really like how you capitalized the first letter of each sentence and how you used commas." The student thus understands what he or she did well, which helps develop more accurate self-awareness and self-assessment skills and increases the student's ability to replicate success. That is, the student recognizes the personal effort that resulted in a better essay. In addition, the student may be less dismissive of praise or rewards when adults give specific feedback, because they are offering evidence to

back up their words (versus a trite remark such as "Nice work," which the student hears often and therefore may discount more readily).

10. ***Encourage others to praise and reward the behavior.*** Receiving praise or rewards from different people can help the student to internalize and generalize behavior more quickly. In school, peers and other staff—from custodians to secretaries to specialists—can praise and reward the student or class. For instance, the principal may drop in to praise a class for a targeted behavior. When working with an individual student, think of adults in school with whom the student has close relationships and enlist their support.

    Teachers should communicate the student's behavioral success to the student's parents; they can praise or reward the behavior as well. Other people at home who can encourage the student include siblings, relatives, and neighbors.

11. ***Provide praise and rewards across settings, when appropriate.*** If you expect a behavior to occur in multiple settings, make sure feedback is provided in all of them to the extent possible. Let's say that the student is learning to raise his or her hand before talking. If the student has five classes with five different teachers, every teacher should praise the student for the correct behavior. If not, it will be more difficult to prevent the student from calling out in any class. Likewise, if parents expect their teenager to put the cell phone away at dinner, the behavior should be reinforced during meals at home *and* in restaurants.

12. ***Encourage students to praise and reward themselves.*** This technique fosters a student's self-management skills and a sense of pride in his or her own behavior. For example, a teacher or parent could say, "If I were you right now, I would be thinking, 'Great job, Marcus, you should feel proud of yourself!'" When appropriate for the student's age, self-reinforcement can be taught (see *Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home*). For example, a student who completes an assignment early can learn to self-reward with free time to read, draw, or work on some other preferred activity.

13. ***Use rewards that the student desires.*** Teachers and parents should ensure that the reward is something the student likes, values, and wants to earn. The reward needs to help motivate the student. Make an effort to identify and design rewards based on individual preferences. A reward menu, which lists a number of different items the student can earn, may help. Adding choice increases the chance of finding an effective reward and allows the student to feel more in control. Schools also can work with parents to identify possibilities. The home typically has greater control over rewards, especially tangible ones, and may be able to provide something highly motivating.

    Individualization is obviously more difficult at the classroom level. However, almost all students like rewards such as extra recess, free time, homework passes, bonus points on assignments, pizza parties, screen time, or getting to do schoolwork outside.

Specific Recommendations to Help Avoid Extrinsic Motivation

As discussed earlier, it is important to balance the use of rewards with their potentially harmful effects on intrinsic motivation and moral development. Teachers and parents need to help students understand that the promise of a reward is not the only reason to behave appropriately. The following recommendations are designed for that purpose.

14. ***Use rewards to provide positive feedback, not to control student behavior.*** Rewards should be used as a way to provide students with recognition in a positive and supportive manner. Students thus understand and appreciate the importance of their behavior, which helps avoid external motivation. A reward—or the withholding of one—should not be used as a way to bribe, threaten, or control students. Be sure to communicate to the student that this is not your intent. Also, remember that some students, especially older ones, can view a public reward as more controlling than a private reward. Do not say:
    - "I will give you a sticker if you finish your work."
    - "If you behave, you will get a ____."
    - "You get a token because I caught you being good."

    Instead, say:
    - "I'm going to call your parents to tell them how much your behavior has improved. You completed all assignments this week without arguing."

- "Wow, every one of you was responsible and turned in homework this week—so there's no homework tonight!"
- "You were very respectful to your brother, so we are going to the movies on Friday."

15. ***Use the fewest rewards necessary to maintain the desired behavior.*** If the student is already displaying a behavior, then using rewards too often—especially in a controlling manner—may decrease intrinsic motivation and promote self-centered moral reasoning. For example, if the student is choosing to read at night, then paying the student for each completed chapter could undermine intrinsic motivation and promote moral reasoning guided by rewards (i.e., "It's important to read so that you earn rewards or avoid punishment.").

16. ***Use rewards in surprising ways.*** Students who are not expecting a reward for meeting expectations—they are not told beforehand that it will happen—will not be focused solely on earning a reward. This condition in turn decreases the perception of potentially being controlled and discourages extrinsic motivation. For instance, if the student likes Legos, surprise the student with a new set after he or she has studied diligently for a test in a challenging subject.

17. ***Emphasize the value or usefulness of the behavior, both presently and in the future.*** This helps the student understand how one's behavior positively affects oneself and others, whether academically or socially. In addition, when the student recognizes the natural benefits of a particular behavior, it promotes higher levels of intrinsic motivation and moral development. It also helps the student develop confidence to continue to act appropriately.

    For example:
- "That's terrific that you controlled your anger when Jerome teased you. That's an important skill that will help you keep friends."
- "Great! You must have stopped and thought about how your behavior might affect others."

18. ***Do not teach the student that the most important reason for the behavior is to get a reward (or to avoid punishment).*** This helps avoid the lowest level of moral reasoning. Instead, focus on other reasons for the behavior and recognize the thoughts, emotions, and dispositions that underlie good behavior, such as feelings of pride, empathy, responsibility, caring, and kindness. For example, do not say: "You get a ticket because you did not hit or tease Jackie, even though she called you a name." Instead, say: "I noticed that you were able to control your anger—you clearly care about not hurting others. You should feel good about yourself. Thanks for being a kind person."

    Consider some other good examples:
- "Great! You should feel really proud of yourself for working so hard."
- "Nice job thinking about others. The class really appreciates what you did."
- "That was a kind gesture. I imagine you would want others to do the same for you."
- "I'm giving you a reward. But I also know that you care about others and would help Felipa even if you did not get a prize."
- "Because you all behaved so well with the substitute yesterday, I'm giving the class 15 minutes of free time for your responsible actions."

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

http://www.interventioncentral.org/ behavioral-intervention-modification

Intervention Central has practical strategies, including forms and checklists, for teachers regarding the use of rewards.

https://www.pbisrewards.com/pbis-incentives/

http://www.chalkable.com/wp-content/ uploads/2015/09/100-Unique-and-Free-Rewards.pdf

https://www.wisconsinpbisnetwork.org/assets/files/ resources/Free%20or%20Inexpensive%20Rewards. pdf

These three websites provide lists of rewards that can be used in school for students in elementary, middle, and high school.

https://habyts.com/51-reward-ideas-to-motivate-and -inspire-kids/

This website provides a list of rewards that can be used at home.

https://i.pinimg.com/originals/10/5f/31/105f31d35c95 bc843af137c0c79b5bf0.jpg

This website provides a number of ways to replace the phrase "good job."

Related Helping Handouts

Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for School

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