

The Learning Edge by Jim Rietmulder of The Circle School

Punishment and rewards Seeking to improve on the traditional approach, vast resources have been invested in studies of intrinsic motivation, and we have come to know a great deal about it. Long ago, educators came to understand that punishment severely reduces intrinsic motivation, and therefore holds no promise for enhancement of learning. This finding holds true for punishments of all kinds, and also for *threats* of punishment.

What about rewards? Intensely studied in the last twenty years, researchers have minutely analyzed all types of rewards and a vast array of methods for handing them out to students. A survey of research on rewards in schools, including 37 separate studies, flatly declares the consensus conclusion that *rewards reduce intrinsic motivation*. (8) What's more, it appears that the damage is greatest among children who are highly motivated to begin with. (9) Rewards dull curiosity. It's that simple. As A. S. Neill observed, offering a reward for something is "tantamount to declaring that the activity is not worth doing for its own sake." (10)

Rewards and punishment—including grades, adult approval, smiley face stickers, and on and on—lead to less interest in a task, poorer performance, and shallower interaction with the task. Researcher Alfie Kohn surveys the modern scientific literature in detail and concludes that "Rewards and punishments are worthless at best and destructive at worst." (11)

Controlling tactics versus autonomy Research about intrinsic motivation is voluminous, showing that *all* of the following reduce intrinsic motivation and impede learning: grades, testing, other forms of imposed evaluation, *telling* people they will be evaluated (even if they aren't), threats of punishment, promises of rewards, pop quizzes, surveillance, hovering, close supervision, calling on children to speak involuntarily, goal setting, unwanted competition. Even *personal praise* has been found generally to reduce intrinsic motivation and the power it brings to learning. (12)

Worse still, "results clearly show [that] academic intrinsic motivation and anxiety are negatively related." (13) In other words, grades and other traditional school tactics not only impede learning, but also increase

children's anxiety— an indication that higher needs are not being met. Furthermore, the harder we push, the worse it gets.

Thoughtful self-examination and the preponderance of research findings agree on the simple principle that intrinsic motivation is diminished by controlling tactics. Apparently we naturally resist efforts to bend us to someone else's purposes. Perhaps our natural resistance to control by others is a wholesome expression of the sovereign nature of attention. Nature is simply keeping us on track, following our internal compass to self-actualization.

The news about intrinsic motivation is not all negative. Research findings are also eminently clear that *autonomy increases intrinsic motivation*. (14) Giving a person significant control of their activities— *self-determination*— increases motivation and enhances learning. Self-chosen exercise of our natural gifts of attentional choice and personal interest lead to greatest expansion of knowledge and self.

Perhaps your own experience confirms the principle that self-determination increases motivation. Perhaps, like most people, you find greater enthusiasm for meeting goals that you have set for yourself, and less enthusiasm for meeting the demands of others: think of a New Year's resolution established for *you* by your spouse. Perhaps you find greater satisfaction in a day's activities that you have planned for yourself, and less satisfaction in following plans and activities that someone else has imposed upon you, against your will.

To rebel against encroachment upon one's birthright of attentional choice is a natural, healthy, wholesome response. To suppress and deaden the inborn compass is to invite loss of direction and loss of enthusiasm for life.

8 Ruth A. Zbrzezny, "Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation: Improving Learning in the Elementary Classroom"; Exit Project, Indiana University at South Bend (1989).

9 Fred W. Danner and Edward Lonky, "A Cognitive-Developmental Approach to the Effects of Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation", in *Child Development* 52 (September 1981).

10 Mark Morgan, "Reward-Induced Decrements and Increments in Intrinsic Motivation", in *Review of Educational Research* (1984).

11 Alfie Kohn, *Punished By Rewards* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

12 Lean Lipps Birch, University of Illinois, reported in *Punished By Rewards*, p72. Also, "A Cognitive-Developmental Approach...".

13 Adele Eskeles Gottfried, "Relationships Between Academic Intrinsic Motivation and Anxiety in Children and Young Adolescents", in *Journal of School Psychology* v20 n3 (Fall 1982) pp205-215, as abstracted in ERIC database.

14 Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, "Curiosity and Self-directed Learning: The Role of Motivation in Education", from ED 207 377, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 1981.

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