



## **Of Carrots and Sticks – How do we foster cooperation, contribution, and intrinsic motivation in our children when we live in the material world?**

This is not an easy conversation with clear answers. In past versions of the “off the shelf” Parenting Wisely program, parents are encouraged to learn the skill of setting up *point systems* or *contracts* with their children. These tools are supposed to help modify children’s behavior to decrease unwanted behaviors and increase wanted ones. In my opinion, these tools should only be used as a last resort if collaborative problem solving along with the reinforcement of increased parental positive regard, attachment relationship, and the building of interpersonal trust has not been effective enough. Critics of point systems and contracts raise these issues:

- Kids who are consistently bribed and rewarded are likely to grow into adults who are overly dependent on others for approval and recognition, lacking their own self-confidence and sense of responsibility.
- They may ask questions such as: What’s in it for me? What’s the payoff? Does it count for anything? Do you like it? Did you see me do it? Did I do it right? (Coloroso, p.18, Kids Are Worth It?)

Alyson Schaefer, author of *Honey, I Wrecked The Kids*, states that autocratic parenting makes children into obedient underlings when behavior is controlled or manipulated by the use of punishment and rewards to keep children in line.

Sharon Selby, RCC, a long-time child and youth counsellor has this to say, “I have seen behaviourism work very effectively in the short-term but I do wonder about the long term benefits. My belief is that we are all motivated by incentives and desires, but it is how we become motivated that is the key. If we feel that it is

someone else's agenda (in most cases a parent) then the natural instinct is to push back. There may be compliance, but then, in my opinion, it's because the reward is highly motivating, and this sets up the pattern for, "What will you give me next time? And "I'll only do it if you give me ....."

My belief is that the incentives need to be more natural and built-in to foster intrinsic motivation. For example, practicing a skill leads to mastery, enjoyment, increased self-esteem, positive attention from others, and positive feelings. These are the real rewards of making an effort and doing one's best. It may be that parents need to help their kids recognize how their accomplishments benefit them in these ways. When it comes to fostering intrinsic motivation to change or adopt new behaviours, parents can start with all the tools associated with collaborative problem solving. Later, when the solution has been successful, the parent can discuss all the positive things that came out of that change in behavior. These should include a reflection both on the practical benefits, as well as how the new behavior is the embodiment of a family value. So, if the new behavior was to decrease yelling during arguments and increase calm discussion, a parent might reflect on the results and the benefits. What might those be?

Limits, of course, may still have to be set, but not in the form of punishment. The most effective limit-setting I've seen is when it makes sense, is consistent, and still respects the dignity of the child. An example of this might be limits that are set around the use of electronics in the house when they are creating a source of conflict and disconnection between family members.

With these points in mind, let's talk about motivation, rewards, punishments, and how these concepts and experiences have played a role in your lives. How do these concepts play into self-respect, respect of others, the ability to make wise choices, taking responsibility seriously, and healthy self-esteem?

When you think about training your children both in your family value system, and in specific skills, what motivates them? How do you reinforce the positive behavior you are training? What works in the short term? What works in the long term? Do you think your children abide by family values and expectations due to their own internal motivation, or only in response to external factors? How do you train your kids to "do the right thing" while fostering the intrinsic desire to do so? How do rewards affect your relationship with your children? How do punishments affect your relationship with your children?