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Why Star Charts, Rewards, Bribes, Over-praise Don't Work Behavior Modification Critiqued

- **Putting a star on a chart when a child successfully uses the toilet,**
- **Rewarding a child with an M&M for putting her boots on,**
- **Giving a child a matchbox car every hour that he doesn't hurt other children in the classroom,**
- **Earning points for using "please" and "thank you." Once the child has earned 12 points, she may pick a lunch-time restaurant,**
- **Giving extra cookies to children who helped at clean-up time,**

Could all be examples of what many adults consider Behavior Modification. There seems to be endless ways parents and teachers try to motivate children for certain behaviors. These systems are called by many names, "Behavior Modification Systems," "Token Economy Programs," or sometimes "Positive Reinforcement Techniques."

Undoubtedly there are times and places where Behavior Modification could be used properly to externally motivate a person with criminal behavior, a service dog in training, or even an aquarium dolphin. With the exception of these situations the day-to-day use of Behavior Modification with children is typically unnecessary and ill-advised.

Reinforcement systems are powerful manipulators of children; however, an adult's role is to empower children, not to manipulate them.

On its own, praise such as, "Good Job," is an adult-controlled form of reinforcement. It is a verbal reward system rather than a tangible reward system, but it is really no different from stickers, etc... In an environment where adults use a great deal of praise, children are less cooperative with others and are more unsure of themselves.

Nevertheless, encouragement is appropriate and powerful. This entails letting children know what they are doing well by giving them specific information that is helpful, "You picked up the blocks quickly and neatly. They will be easy to find and play with tomorrow."

The dirty dozen. Concerns about using reward systems with children.

Concern #1

Why not enjoy allowing another natural piece of child development unfold?

When Behavior Modification Systems are used with normal developmental tasks, i.e. learning to use the toilet, the question arises, why does this effort need an external reward for a child to be motivated to perform the task? Bribes are not needed for helping children learn to walk, suck a bottle, or use the pincher grasp to pick something up. Child Development experts agree, proper motivation comes from within the child.

Concern #2

Children can quickly learn to turn the system around and use it as "mini-blackmail."

After several occurrences of offering a "gum ball" reward to my child if she was "quick and helpful" in the grocery store, my daughter told me that she would be helpful "if" I bought her a gumball. No way! I am not willing to buy good behavior. I explained I needed her to be helpful and quick in the store so we can spend time at home with mom, because she is capable of being quick, and because she feels good about choosing to be helpful, not because I'll reward her with junk food.

Concern #3

An important part of Behavior Modification is to overlook failures.

There are many behaviors that are used in Behavior Modification that simply need to be addressed. If the targeted behavior is "using words with your brother when you disagree," and the contention escalates to physical blows, ignoring the failure of performing the targeted behavior would seem odd at best.

Concern #4

Children's interest in the reinforcer wanes before the system has instilled habitual behavior.

I have seen many times where the child is no longer interested in the reinforcer. If the child is to be motivated by receiving the token but is no longer excited by it, the system fails or the token needs to become more appealing. A Behavior Modification project I witnessed under the direction of a psychologist changed the reinforcer from a matchbox car, to a quarter, to a dollar, to dinner out with the child's teacher. Eventually the system failed and everyone was at a loss with what to do next.

When designating "reinforcers" adults often overlook whether they are effective rewards for that child.

Concern #5

The level of training to properly use Behavior Modification is rigorous.

The level of training required to design and implement behavior modification systems correctly is concerning. Most teachers and parents who use Behavior Modification are not versed in Positive Behavior Management Methods and resort to Behavior Modification for lack of a better idea. The level of training and the mental health protection required when using Behavior Modification correctly are of critical importance. The rules around using Behavior Modification are much more complex than other guidance methods adults find useful when disciplining children.

Concern #6

The rationale behind a child's "willingness" or "unwillingness" to perform a specific behavior is not addressed in using Behavior Modification.

When setting up a Behavior Modification plan, teachers and parents do not look at the reason for the child's need to be motivated for the specific behavior. A functional assessment of the behavior is often overlooked. Why isn't the child willing/able to use the toilet? Why isn't the child remembering to use manners? Why isn't the child able to talk rather than hit when in a disagreement with a classmate?

One of the important aspects of Behavior Modification is targeting a specific behavior, something the child is capable of enacting. If the child is not capable of the behavior, Behavior Modification will become frustrating for all parties involved.

Often overlooked is seeing if a child can consistently suppress an undesired behavior or use a targeted behavior, even if they are highly motivated. If the child is not capable of the desirable behavior then introducing contingencies is only likely to cause distress and lead to further behavioral problems.

Setting a time span, like 30-minutes to earn the reward, without first seeing if a 5-minute span is even remotely within the child's abilities is a typical flaw. These oversights are common when a Behavior Modification plan is poorly designed.

Concern #7

Not defining a specific behavior to reinforce.

"Being good" is not a specific behavior. What part of "being good" is going to elicit a reinforcer? This vagueness leaves both the adult and the child with a system that is open to interpretation. Objectiveness is not possible when the specific behavior is not well defined.

Concern #8

The adult's mood invariably effects the delivery of the reinforcer.

When well-rested the adult may react differently to the targeted behavior than when the adult is overtired. The confusion from this disparity easily leads the child to bewilderment.

Concern #9

The connection between a specific behavior being performed and the reinforcer is too long for the child to internalize a systematic consequence.

Waiting to get home from child care to be reinforced for a behavior that occurred earlier in the day is not going to help the child form a link between the behavior and the reward. As with all discipline, the behavior and its outcome need to be closely linked in time.

Concern #10

Stopping the system before the targeted behavior becomes habitual.

Systematically and gradually introducing longer delays before a reinforcer is delivered are necessary for the long term results. After stopping the program abruptly the child may exhibit the targeted behavior for a few days then resort back to the pre-Behavior Modification behaviors.

Concern #11

Jumping quickly to change the child instead of changing the situation.

Even if we agree that the child's behavior needs to change, that doesn't mean that we start by applying direct, often illogical, consequences to the child's behavior. Our first intervention should be to change the environment to reduce triggers to the undesirable behavior, to provide more support and cueing, and to see if the child has the prerequisite skills to exhibit the desirable behavior. The principal intervention should be to teach the targeted skills while providing more support and cueing in the environment.

If Behavior Modification is ever to be used, it is best to put it in the "last resort" category. There are many other methods that are more likely to have a long-term successful outcome. Reinvolvement (not Redirection), Calm-Down Time (not Time-Out), Encouragement (not Praise), Natural and Logical Consequences, Extinction, Substitution, Active Listening, or Modifying the Environment are much better techniques for the day-to-day behaviors our children need assistance with.

Concern #12

Not knowing when Behavior Modification is not working.

"If it is not working, switch gears." This sounds easy but understanding when Behavior Modification is not working can only come from being objective, having advanced training in the technique, and having many experiences of successes and failures of the system. It can be argued that an adult who is implementing the Behavior Modification plan is too involved in it to be able to easily make this distinction.

Arguably, Behavior Modification has its place in the world. Using it in place of positive guidance methods often replaces long term goals with short term ones.

We can *demand* compliance from a child and get it for a while. We can *nurture* responsibility in a child and have it for life.

