

Promoting Discipline & Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

Tom Sawyer and B.F. Skinner

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Tom Sawyer was a better psychologist than B.F. Skinner

Tom Sawyer was a better psychologist than B.F. Skinner, the famous exponent of *behaviorism*. This theory *assumes* that *all* behaviors are prompted ***only by external sources.***

In contrast, Tom used the power of ***internal*** motivation. He enticed others to become ***committed*** to the task by offering them the privilege of whitewashing the fence.

Behaviorism creates a *desire for the reward* (the bribe), ***rather than for the task,*** and *never creates commitment.* This approach—that began as a method for controlling animal behavior—has some damaging effects on humans. Unfortunately, behaviorism is still rampant in much of public education and parenting.

Behaviorism focuses on the ***external.***
It completely neglects the ***internal.***

Discipline Without Stress is so successful because it ***inspires.***
It is ***uplifting*** and prompts ***desire*** and ***commitment to the task.***

As opposed to using rewards as incentives and acknowledgements, ***giving rewards for expected standards of behavior is counterproductive.*** As mentioned, it is also based on the outmoded idea that all behavior is modified thorough external approaches. ***Internal*** approaches—such as ***self-talk***—have no place in this mindset.

People who use this behavioral approach—often referred to as *behavior modification*—have just one objective: changing behavior. Practitioners of this approach do NOT promote ADULT values. By

rewarding kids with something youngsters value (candy, stickers, prizes, etc.), we simply reinforce their CHILDHOOD values. In the process, we lose opportunities to pass on OUR values—such as generosity, kindness, responsibility, perseverance, and integrity. What we really hope to do is to teach young people about values that will last a lifetime. So, while most kids will do what you want them to do to get the treat, and it might look as if they are becoming more mature, they have not moved one step further towards becoming more responsible.

Also, a common myth is that rewards *motivate* young people to be responsible. They don't. The bribe becomes the focus not the desired change. Certainly, if the person is interested in the reward (bribe), there may be some **short-range** success.

However, regardless of how much we may think that rewards lead toward internalizing the desired behavior of acting responsibly, there is no evidence that this ever occurs. In contrast, there is much research to suggest that an "external locus of control" (external motivation) does not transition to an "internal locus of control" (internal motivation).

An example of this was vividly shared with me after one of my presentations to the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

My name is George H. Orfe, and I am the principal from South Dakota who told you the story of the boy and the \$5.00 his father gave him for each "A" grade. You asked that I relate the story to you. Here it is. I had a father of a fifth grader who gave his son \$5 for each A on his report card. The first marking period the child received eight A's and \$40 from his father. The second marking period ended in January, and report cards went home at the beginning of February. The father was quite upset since his son had dropped to only one A, 2 B's, and the rest C's. In the conference with the father, I suggested we call his son in and see what the problem was. The boy came into my office, sat down, and we began to talk. My first question was, "How is it that your grades have slipped so much this marking period," and the boy quickly responded, "I didn't need the money!" The father

slumped in the chair.

A major problem of bribing people with rewards is that the cost inevitably increases. Although a candy bar may prompt a five-year old to behave appropriately, it will cost you more to persuade a fifteen-year-old.

Notice also that this approach promotes a mentality of, "What's in it for me?" which lacks any sense of moral development or social responsibility. The reward becomes the motivator, instead of the expected standard of behavior.

Here is a major point to remember about **external rewards**: they **change motivation**. This was clearly exhibited in the following classic story.

An elderly gentleman spent each afternoon tending his large garden on his corner lot. A group of ten-year olds began harassing him on their way home from school. After a few days listening to their jeers and insults, he decided to act. The next day he met the boys as they approached his house. The gentleman told the youths that he lived alone and was enjoying the attention they were giving him. To show his appreciation, he told them if they continued showing attention to him on the next day he would give each of them a dollar. Amazed and excited, the next day they showed up right after school. They showered the elderly man with epithets and jeers. True to his word, the man put down his gardening tools, walked up to them, and pulled out a roll of bills from his pocket. He handed each youngster a dollar and encouraged a repeat on the next day—at which time he would give each of them a quarter. The kids thought that was pretty good and came back the next day to taunt him. The next day at the first catcall, the elderly gentleman walked over with a roll of quarters and again paid off his hecklers. He then announced that in the future he would only give them a penny.

Do you think the boys came back?

The sly gentleman's plan was elegantly simple. He rewarded the children and thereby changed their motivation from harassing him for

fun to that of getting the reward. As soon as a meaningful reward was no longer there, neither were they.

Here is another point to consider. In giving young people rewards for appropriate behavior, we are fostering the concept that, when they get older, society will also reward them for such behavior. This is simply contrary to fact. When was the last time you were given a reward for stopping at a red light? A prime point to consider when using *external* rewards to change behavior (in contrast to *internal* rewards such as self-satisfaction) is that **they often "punish" those who fulfilled all obligations but were still NOT given the reward while others are.** The following example clearly proves the point. It is from a post and response at: DisciplineWithoutStress@yahoogroups.com

The post:

I just wanted to quickly relay a rewards-based disaster. One of our seventh-graders, in fact, the daughter of a teacher, recently wanted to go to the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) reward dance. She is an A honor roll student, never a discipline problem, and a wonderful kid. In the haste of "bribing" misbehaving students to be good, we neglected to "reward" her for doing what she had motivated herself to do. Long story short, she did not have enough PBS tickets to go to the dance. How horrible!

Looks like rewards systems don't quite cover the good kids as well as they should. Good thing that they are intrinsically motivated and feel good about the fact that they are great kids and their teachers love them!

A response post:

Your experience really points out what I think is a **big problem with any reward based behaviour program—the fact that the goal of the program (often not clearly stated) is simply to get kids to behave.** *When the goal is obedience, then the program isn't truly too worried about the kids who are already obedient.* Then things happen—just as they did in your school where **a wonderful child is left feeling terrible.** Of course, no one intended for that to happen but still that's often the result That's why I feel so strongly about

DISCIPLINE WITHOUT STRESS. The goal is to raise everyone, not just those who are a big problem—so the program can focus on all kids. That's what I love: EVERY kid gains. Some gain by bringing them up to Level C, while those who are already there gain, too. They learn about Level D, which is such a valuable understanding for living the rest of their lives. No other program that I'm aware of provides this understanding. (The levels are described at [the hierarchy.](#))

More information about the use of rewards is available at [MarvinMarshall.com/external.](http://MarvinMarshall.com/external)

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