



Resorting to Rewards

In our society, when young people show a lack of interest, a typical reaction is to offer rewards to increase their motivation. For example, if students aren't interested in reading, a typical solution is to offer prizes for whoever reads the greatest number of books.

In the short-term, prizes can increase student interest in participating in a reading program. The problem is, students then become focused on the prizes rather than in what they are reading. Once the prizes have been given out, students are even less likely to view reading as something they would choose to do on their own. (“Why should I read unless I am rewarded for it?”)

Dozens of research studies over the past 25 years across age groups and cultures have shown that using external rewards actually have the unintended effect of decreasing motivation in the long-term. Researchers on motivation contrast “extrinsic motivation” that comes from offering external incentives with “intrinsic motivation” which means interest in an activity for its own sake (such as reading because you are interested in the story or topic of the book).

Interests Provide Energy for Learning

One of the most valuable natural resources young people have are their interests. Once they become interested in a topic – for example, a sport (such as basketball), an animal (such as horses), or a style of music (such as hip-hop) – they seek out opportunities to learn more. Kids who are seen as having short attention spans can become very focused and spend long periods of time on topics that interest them.

Rather than resorting to rewards, the challenge within the Clubhouse is how to leverage the motivation that comes from pursuing and building upon young people's and mentors' interests.

Focusing on Effort Rather than Ability

A natural impulse when seeing a young person with interest and ability is to offer praise by saying something like, “You're good at drawing!” However, professor Carol Dweck at Columbia University has found that, contrary to popular belief, praise for young people's abilities actually decreases motivation to overcome obstacles.

She and her colleagues compared the effects of two kinds of praise: praise for ability (“you're good at this”) vs. praise for effort (“you worked hard at this”). They found that praising young people's abilities increased motivation – but only as long as they were doing well. Once these young people encountered difficulties, they reacted by selecting easier problems that would make them look good and avoiding further challenges. In contrast, praising young people's efforts increased motivation even in the face of difficulties, and led them to seek out further challenges.

How does this compare with your own experience with praise, rewards, and motivation? What strategies or approaches have you found useful for encouraging young people to pursue their interests and try new challenges?

Further reading...

Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development, by Carol S. Dweck (2000).

Punished by Rewards, by Alfie Kohn (1999). For more articles by Alfie Kohn, see <http://www.alfiekohn.org>

Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation, by Edward Deci (1995).