Should you reward your child for A grades?

Psychology expert warns that the child may end up seeing a reward as the goal.

Say you are a parent trying to get your son to aim for all A* in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). To get him to work hard, you promise him a reward - a trip to Disneyland or the sleek new iPad, $150 for every A*.

Sounds like a sure-win strategy, and you know others who have used it to good effect. What child can resist the promise of a big reward?

And all you want is for him to ace the PSLE and make it to a top secondary school, because he will then sail through the rest of his school days and be set for life.

Hold on just a minute, says motivational psychology expert Richard Ryan from Rochester University, New York.

That is definitely the wrong tactic if you want your child to fly solo and take responsibility for his own learning.

'It is the wrong path to take to get him to work hard,' he says. 'The negative consequences are not always immediately apparent, and this strategy puts the responsibility for learning on the parent.'

'Now the parent is the one who has to monitor the child, instead of a child assimilating and really internalising the value of learning and hard work, which is really what we want to develop,' Professor Ryan says.

Parents can show they appreciate their children's effort without killing the motivation to learn.

'It would be better if a parent,' Ryan says.
after his child does well, 
'Let's go out and celebrate, we 
will have a meal or something.' 
In my country, it's always pizza. 
This is not undermining, 
because it is acknowledging and 
celebrating something 
competently done,' he says.
Prof Ryan, visiting professor at 
the National Institute of 
Education, explains that the 
notion that rewards and 
punishments can motivate or 
reinforce a desired response is 
the behaviourist way of 
thinking.

Popularised by American 
psychologist Burrhus Frederic 
Skinner in the 1950s, that 
approach not only dominated 
psychology's landscape for 
many years, but has also been 
applied in many areas from 
education to business.

But in the 1980s, Prof Ryan 
and his colleague Edward Deci 
developed a different view 
called the 'self-determination theory', 
arguing that if teachers 
or parents use reinforcements 
and rewards to get students to 
behave or score in a test, the 
children's motivation will be 
dependent on the reward.

'And once the reward is over, 
they'll do no more. You're not 
helping their interests grow,' he 
says.

He drills a little deeper into the 
self-determination theory to 
explain further.

All humans have three basic, 
innate, psychological needs: the 
need to belong or feel 
connected, the need to feel 
competent, and the need for 
avonomy or self-
determination.

'When those needs are 
satisfied, we're motivated, 
productive and happy. When 
they are thwarted, our 
motivation, productivity and 
happiness plummet,' he says.

'It begins with the premise that 
people are already pretty 
motivated.

'We are naturally motivated 
to be curious and to learn. This is 
really different from theories 
that state that people are not 
very motivated creatures, and 
that you have to do something 
to them to get them to act.'

He recalls some of the research 
that he and Professor Deci did 
to show their theory was true. 
One experiment, renowned in 
psychology now, was done by 
Prof Deci using the Soma cube 
puzzle - similar to a Rubik's 
Cube. He divided college 
students into two groups and 
gave each group a Soma cube 
and an assortment of 
magazines.

He told them to work on the 
puzzle, but he offered to pay the 
members of one group for each 
design they correctly 
assembled.

After some time, he told the 
students the exercise was done 
and said he would leave them 
for about 10 minutes while he 
went to record data and would 
return with a questionnaire.

In fact, he stepped out to 
continue observing the two 
groups without them knowing.

He saw a noticeable difference: 
To a significant degree, the 
participants who had been 
promised payment were more 
likely to put down the puzzles 
and pick up the magazines to 
read. Participants who were 
not promised money, on the 
other hand, were more likely to 
continue working on the 
puzzles.

It showed that the offer of a 
monetary reward based on 
performance had the effect of 
dampening the desire of that 

group of participants to 
continue working on the puzzle.

For the paid group, the focus 
had shifted from the activity to 
the compensation.

In the decades since, there have 
been hundreds of more studies by 
scientists worldwide, with many 
testing the theory on everything 
from smoking cessation to 
weight loss and exercise.

Many arrived at the same 
conclusion, Prof Ryan says.

'Human beings have an innate 
drive to be autonomous, self-
determined, and connected to 
one another. When these needs 
are met, the actions of people - 
be they students or employees - 
will be rooted not by short-term
and inconsistent extrinsic motivation, but by sustaining, ingrained and habitual intrinsic motivation.'

Of course, critics also point to evidence to the contrary. It is not hard to find children who read more books when promised a new toy or teenagers who improve their grades when promised a shiny new gadget.

Prof Ryan admits readily that rewards can be powerful motivators.

'The danger is that they may be powerful in a not-so-helpful way or even in a bad way,' he says.

He gives the example of a chief executive officer who is promised a huge bonus if he raises his company's stock price.

'He may well reach that target. But he may use unethical methods to reach that target and what he does may have bad consequences for people down the road.'

He adds that often, rewards are given for outcomes as opposed to valued behaviour.

'When you reward outcomes, you also reward any behaviours that get to the outcome, whether good or not.'

Coming back to the pressing issue for many parents - on how to encourage their children to do well in an examination - if rewards diminish motivation, what is a parent to do?

Prof Ryan says: 'There is nothing wrong with giving things to your child. The issue is with making them contingent on performance outcomes.

'A reward that acknowledges a great effort is more effective than one that is promised upfront for getting an A.

Appreciation is always a better motivator than control.'

Encouraging a child to do his or her best is enough.

'Conveying that you will love your child just as much no matter what the outcome is not only supportive, but it may also reduce anxiety, which itself can compromise performance,' he says.

'There is no evidence that pressure helps students do better.'

And what if a child does not deliver straight As? How do parents who are disappointed that their children are not stars after all still motivate them to be the best they can be?

Prof Ryan advises parents to acknowledge that, given the way examinations are marked, not every child can be at the very top.

'But should we love them less? That will never help them succeed in life, and the evidence shows this has many long-term costs,' he says.

'In fact, success in life is more likely related to feeling a sense of confidence and security that comes from parents who support their child through successes and setbacks.'

Parents motivate their children best by conveying and modelling the right values, and showing care, concern and helpfulness when they encounter obstacles and difficulties.

'When they seem to be withdrawing effort, we can help most by gentle enquiry into the obstacles, conveying the importance of effort, and helping them organise their efforts to be the best students and people they can be,' he says.

'People focused on rewards miss out on the inner resources of intrinsic motivation and volition. We are most engaged and do our most creative work when we feel that we are acting according to our own will on behalf of goals we find meaningful.'

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What makes people happy

According to the self-determination theory, all humans have three basic psychological needs: the need to belong or feel connected, the need to feel competent, and the need for autonomy or self-determination. When those needs are satisfied, we're motivated, productive and happy. When they are thwarted, our motivation, productivity and happiness plummet,' Prof Ryan says.

Encourage effort

'A reward that acknowledges a great effort is more effective than one that is promised upfront for getting an A.

Appreciation is always a better motivator than control.'
What if my child can't deliver top results?

'Should we love them less? That will never help them succeed in life, and the evidence shows this has many long-term costs. Success in life is more likely related to feeling a sense of confidence and security that comes from parents who support their child through successes and setbacks.'

AN ACTIVE ROLE IN EDUCATION

Professor Richard Ryan, 58, is a clinical psychologist and professor of Psychology, Psychiatry and Education at the University of Rochester, New York, United States.

He is currently a visiting professor for two months at the National Institute of Education where he acts as a consultant to the Motivation in Educational Research Lab and conducts seminars for academics and teachers.

He co-founded Self-Determination Theory with his colleague Edward Deci and has published well over 200 scholarly articles and chapters in the areas of human motivation, personality development and applied psychology.

He has also published two books with Professor Deci: Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior (1985) and the Handbook of Self-Determination Research (2002).

In addition to basic research on motivational processes, he studies health psychology, sport and exercise, education, organisations and psychotherapy.

His current research interests include: the acquisition and impact of materialism and other extrinsic goals; the determinants of vitality and energy; mindfulness; and aspects of well-being and life satisfaction.

He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association and a two-time winner of the Phi Delta Kappa award for research contribution in education.

He is also a psychotherapist, and a trainer of therapists and counsellors.

Prof Ryan is married to psychotherapist Miriam Gale and they have two adult children.