Should you reward your child for A grades?

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

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BY SANDRA DAVIE

Say you are a parent trying to get your son to aim for all A*s 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.

'If a parent were to say, 'I will give you this if you achieve all As', the child is likely to do it for that reward,' he says. 'It also means that subsequently, he will think, well, the only reason to learn is to get the reward. If I am not getting the reward that I want, I am not interested in learning.'

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,

after his child does well, says, '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 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,' 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 promised no 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 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

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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.