

Cash for Grades

Undermines Achievement



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Dear Barry,

Lately, it seems that parents are doling out cash as a way to kick-start their son's motivation to reach for higher grades. Rewards seem to make sense, yet I'm confused. Don't they also create a monster who gives to get?

I really don't want to become one of those parents who gives their kids money for making their beds, cleaning their rooms and helping set and clear the table. And I certainly don't want my son to learn that life is more about rewards than results, that working hard is only worth it if you can buy something at the end, or that contributing only matters if you get something in return. But it seems tempting. What do you think?

Sara, West Vancouver

MONEY MONEY MONEY

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Dear Sara

Parents who use cash to inspire grades at school might be surprised to learn that they just may be impeding their son's potential for real learning. While plenty of parenting books advise against punishment, you'll have to look awfully hard to find books that discourage rewards.

At first glance, the offer of "\$100 for every A," might sound like a fair and reasonable incentive, positive reinforcement, and even preparation for the real world of work. However, a deeper look will show that temporary compliance for short-term gains is strikingly ineffective at producing lasting changes in school achievement – or life for that matter.

Of course, I do not intend in any way to question our well-founded desires to support and encourage boys or celebrate

success. I am concerned instead that faith in the power of money to inspire and sustain student success will backfire.

Rewarding good grades with cash may undermine your child's independence, pleasure, and interest. The external motivation of working toward money may also undermine a child's appreciation of the intrinsic pleasures of learning.

A DISGUISED FORM OF CONTROL?

"But wait a minute," you might be saying. "It seems so commonsensical. After all don't employers reward achievement to motivate and stimulate ingenuity?"

While you might hear the media advocating cash incentives for performance, corporate leaders learned long ago the hidden pitfalls of cash rewards. They are a disguised form of control, seducing employees to focus on the prize instead of the task at hand. They work against cooperation and teamwork, the real engine of ingenuity and productivity.

In fact, workplace studies find that incentive-driven employees will not ask for help when they need it, conceal problems so to appear capable, avoid risk-taking, and also shy away from collaborative creativity. Social science research confirms that people who expect to receive a reward do not perform as well as those who expect nothing.

The simple truth is that **cash incentives** motivate your son to want cash **but is this what you are trying to motivate?**

“But isn’t money a motivator for kids who want money?” you might wonder. The simple truth is that cash incentives motivate your son to want cash, but is this what you are trying to motivate?

Cash simply won’t influence your son to perform better unless he already wants to; it also won’t help him become genuinely interested in what he is learning. Youth see through the manipulations involved in incentives and sugar-coated control. I’ll not forget the clever remark a Grade 10 boy once offered to me: “If they have to bribe me to do it, it must be something I don’t want to do.”

Countless experiences and discussions with teens have taught me firsthand that adolescent desire for independence is stronger, most of the time, than the desire to please parents and teachers most of the time.

In our own home I have also noticed that when I leaned one way, our boys tended to lean the other. I believe that the adolescent pursuit of freedom from control will trump the desire for cash almost every time.

Remember that attempts to manipulate easily backfire. If good grades can be used to please you, bad grades can be used to provoke you. Just ask a teacher or school principal’s adolescent son or daughter!

Rewards can also flip into punishment.

Cash for grade depends on satisfying you, and when the going gets tough, your son’s focus on the far-off prize may shift to an awareness of being controlled. The frustration associated with the withheld cash then seems like a punishment. And the more desirable the reward, the more demoralizing it is to miss out.

When grades slip and you worry about your son’s future, it may be tempting to dangle incentives. Keep reminding yourself, however, that growing up is circuitous not a linear process. Lessons – even the lessons associated with failing if need be – will strengthen and test your son’s resources and gradually fosters resiliency.



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“SO WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO CASH INCENTIVES?” YOU MIGHT ASK?

Listen to your boy talk about his grades – and provide him with time and space to reflect as he tests out ideas and options. When he comes up with complaints and excuses, you also might be tempted to take the bait, offering advice or clarification here and there. You can be certain that your son is counting on you to play this role. Instead, I recommend that you avoid taking responsibility for his grades and his career at school. Trust that he will ask for advice when he wants it, and when he is ready to receive it.

Ultimately it is your son’s choice to improve or not improve grades. Your task is to support his path of learning. You can do this through supportive comments that communicate a deep appreciation for your son’s struggle to overcome boredom and inertia, and for any sign that he is assuming responsibility for his own learning.

Consider how the following comments reflect empathy, support, and appreciation for your boy exactly where he is:

- “You don’t have to be perfect or the best at school.”
- “It’s okay to make mistakes and learn by doing something over.”
- “You don’t have to hurry and succeed all at once.”
- “Asking for help is a sign of real courage and strength.”
- “There are some things that we just have to slog through.”
- “I know you could do better if you wanted to. What do you want?”

Rather than bribes or threats, pose a question that shows you trust your son’s ability to figure things out: “What do you think we can do to solve this problem?” Of course, this emphasis on your son’s strengths and resources rather than his difficulties and undeveloped talents requires a conscious shift in your attention. It also requires care, patience, and the willingness to accept that your son is his own person.

While incentives such as treats might motivate your dog to obey, they won’t have any lasting effect on stimulating ingenuity and scholarly pursuit in your son. Stay interested in his school activities and achievement, but let the pleasures of success and the frustrations of failure belong to your boy.

Have faith. He’ll figure it out. Ultimately, your faith in your son and your focus on long-term visions will “pay off” for both of you.



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