

One Page Resource: Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Motivation

Are we paying children to learn?

“In an encouraging environment, children grow in self-confidence and find group membership without the use of external rewards.” (Young Children Nov. 2008)

What is an encouraging environment?

An environment that allows children to grow and change at their own rate; with teachers that are continually assessing and purposefully planning for each child.

Do tangible rewards help children become interested in an activity?

Generally speaking, NO! Rewards may create an opposite effect in which children may end up losing interest in activities that they originally had a true passion for. Children should be allowed to choose where and how long they want to stay with an activity.

Can tangible rewards help with classroom management?

“Rewards” tend to be used as management tools when a teacher feels the classroom is lacking structure and/or discipline. In doing this, teachers are seeking compliance to teacher- desired behaviors. They present children with a tangible reward for “following the rules.” Intrinsic motivation, children’s desire to do things for their own sense of pleasure and satisfaction, is preferable to tangible rewards. It is ultimately more meaningful to children and in the long run will allow children to learn how to function in different environments.

Rather than being "paid" to behave a certain way or complete certain tasks, children should do these things because they feel an internal need to do so. Even when their actions are self-motivated (“I’m going to put the blocks away because I want to use the floor space for a big puzzle.”), this is children’s developmentally appropriate sense of “the right thing to do” (Harlen, 1996; Schloss & Smith, 1998; Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1991). It means more than simply pleasing the adult in charge.

Ideas for Intrinsic Motivation

Give children the opportunity to evaluate their own accomplishments. Ask “What do YOU think? Instead of saying “Good Job!”

Provide children with situations that pose an acceptable challenge. Activities that are slightly difficult will be more motivating and in the end provide a stronger feeling of success when accomplished.

Respond to the children in a consistent, predictable manner, but allow them to be as independent as possible.

Allow children ample time to play to allow for persistence. When children are deeply involved it’s important to allow them to finish their play.

Provide children with an environment that allows them to freely explore in order to see the effects of their actions.



Classroom management programs that rely on rewards and consequences ought to be avoided by any educator who wants students to take responsibility for their own (and others’) behavior—and by any educator who places internalization of positive values ahead of mindless obedience.

~ Alfie Kohn

