



Bribery vs. Reinforcement

I agree. Bribery does not work. However, parenting experts continue to tell folks to reward their children's behaviour. The experts talk in terms of "reinforcement" but sometimes the parent hears "bribery" and as such, parents do not want to participate. Parents learn that bribery does not work; that they cannot buy good behaviour... and the parents are correct.

The problem here is not with the parent, but with miscommunication on the part of parenting experts. We need to clarify what is meant by reinforcement and the difference between that and bribery.

Bribery is paying BEFORE behaviour is delivered. With bribery, parents pay in advance for the "promise" of delivery. However, with payment already in hand, many kids fail to deliver. The child, having already received payment, falls short on delivery while still enjoying the payment. The parent feels deceived or taken advantage of, which in turn leaves parents even more frustrated than when they started.

Rather than buying behaviour, reinforcement is based upon paying AFTER delivery. So rather than buying behaviour, we are rewarding behaviour that has already been delivered. Big difference.

There is a very good reason most companies have policies against pay advances. Even in adult behaviour, the likelihood of delivery is less when they are paid in advance. When homeowners negotiate with contractors for home renovations, they negotiate a partial payment to cover some expenses in advance *and* a "holdback" in order to maintain the motivation of the contractor to finish the job to agreed upon standards.

So the difference between bribery and reinforcement is that with bribery the reward comes before delivery and with reinforcement, the reward come after delivery. This rule is also known as Grandma's Rule, "Finish your dinner, *then* you get desert." The trick is for the parent to not back down even in the face of the child's arguments; dinner first, desert second.

Reinforcement is a reasonable approach to shaping behaviour. Let's face it, few adults would continue in their job without a paycheck at the end. The paycheck for kids however, does not have to be money or extravagant gifts. Just as parents appreciate recognition for their contribution at work, kids appreciate recognition for their efforts and contributions at home and school.

In the absence of such recognition-reward-reinforcement, kids like adults, feel unappreciated, then disconnected and then resentful. The same process that leads to disgruntled employees leads to disruptive kids. Flip side is, reward given as recognition, attention and appreciation *after* deliver, goes a long way to improving relationships and increases the likelihood of future delivery... on the same terms.

Hopefully this clarifies the difference between bribery and reinforcement. Your kid cleaned up... let them know how pleased you are.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.