**Using Rewards as a Behavior Modification Tool**

By Miss Linda

During the last 20 years as a preschool teacher, I have had occasion to use rewards to encourage particular behaviors in children. This is a highly debatable practice and so I have researched whether it is an effective tool or if it is a detrimental practice (see attached summary of research).

When we consider rewards for preschool children, we are talking about a variety of things like stickers and stamps, a trip to a treasure-box, extra time at an enjoyable activity, and even the use of words like “good job”. Some children are intrinsically motivated to do exactly what the teacher asks them to do, and do not necessarily need to be rewarded. Doing what is expected and “right” is a reward in itself to these types of children. However, even these children will do better when they attend school each day thinking something wonderful could happen to them and consequently rewards make school an even more enjoyable environment to them.

On the other hand, many preschool children have not come to the decision that it is in their best interest to obey, listen, or follow directions in school. They are dealing with many new social situations and new rules that seem very limiting to their freedom and self-interest. For these types of children, without the use of rewards and positive reinforcement techniques, the teacher is left with using negative peer pressure, punishment, consequences or other harmful reinforcement methods to help curb unorthodox behavior. This ultimately could make school seem a less than desirable place to be. In this case, it is better to use rewards judiciously as a positive motivator. This keeps the child *desiring* to do what is expected instead of forcing the child to rebel or sending the message that the child is “being bad”.

The ultimate goal of rewards, when used in the proper manner, is to train a child to do what is expected and to create positive habits that can last a lifetime. Of course, when not used properly, rewards can start an expectation of “payment” in a child. In order for rewards to be used in an acceptable manner, they should be used judiciously only for the most important and difficult tasks. They should be used only in a short term manner to establish a behavior and then slowly fading as it is accomplished. It is also important to vary the types of rewards (not the same positive reward all the time) and to vary the times of the rewards so children will not begin an expectation, but will accomplish the behavior in *hopes* of a positive outcome. Most importantly, rewards should be accompanied by a consequence for choosing not to comply with the expected behavior so the child will understand the results and importance of non-compliance. Children (as well as most adults) do better if they have a choice. In this way, children are more likely to choose the rewarded behavior and then comply, than to ignore the reward and continue with the unacceptable behavior.

Ultimately, the final test is whether using rewards works. My answer to this is undeniably, “yes”. I have used rewards *in an appropriate manner* when necessary, and have seen wonders accomplished. Therefore, I feel it is an acceptable tool in a teacher’s tool-box to help motivate children to do their best.

**Research**

(Benefits of using rewards in the classroom)

Researchers, educators, and philosophers have argued that educators should avoid providing rewards for academic performance because such procedures (a) amount to bribing students, (b) reduce the inherent value of what is learned, and( c) reduce the probability that students will engage in academic behaviors when reinforcement is withdrawn or not offered for other academic behaviors (e.g., Deci, Koestner, & Ryan,1999, 2001; Kohn, 1993; see also Akin-Little, Eckert, Lovett, & Little, 2004). Although these perspectives and concerns are debatable, they may make educators, administrators, and parents resistant to using rewards to strengthen academic or behavioral performance.

Although some (e.g., Kohn, 1993) may view rewards for academic behaviors as bribes, such rewards do not meet the standard definition of bribes. Bribes are used to entice someone to engage in inappropriate or unethical behaviors. Because engaging in assigned academic behaviors is appropriate, rewarding such behaviors is not a bribe (O'Leary, Poulos, & Devine, 1972). A common objection to rewarding academic behaviors is that this arrangement teaches students that such behaviors are only important because they lead to reinforcement (Maydosz, 1998). This is thought to distract students and dilute the focus on learning as students become preoccupied with meeting specific goals and earning rewards. Additionally, such procedures may convey to students that the academic work is not worth doing in its own right (Kohn, 1993)

To merely *suppose* or *expect* academic behaviors (e.g., "they should not be rewarded for doing what they are supposed or expected to do"), while failing to reward academic behaviors when they occur, sends a mixed message that assigned academic behavior is important but not important enough to reward. An alternative to rewarding academic performance is to punish students for failing to engage in assigned academic behaviors. This alternative may have more negative side effects than applying rewards for desired behaviors. Specifically, such procedures establish environments where children are behaving appropriately to avoid aversive consequences. In other words, desired academic behaviors are being produced through negative reinforcement. These procedures can result in children's developing strategies to avoid such learning environments (e.g., failing to come to school) and will do little to improve student's attitudes towards

learning and school work (Chance, 1992).

Another concern regarding reinforcing academic responding involves maintaining desired responding after reward programs are withdrawn. Others have found little evidence for these deleterious effects (McGinnis, Friman, & Carlyon, 1999). For an in-depth analysis of these studies, see Akin-Little et al. (2004).

Procedures that can be used to enhance the probability of students' maintaining behaviors that have been reinforced include (a) training loosely, (b) using in discriminable contingencies, (c) using variable schedules of reinforcement, and (d) gradually fading reinforcement (Stokes & Baer, 1977; Stokes & Osnes, 1989).