

## What's the Problem with Bribes?

By Dr. Steve Dennis - College Dean of Education & Human Development of BYU-Idaho

The classic parent educator, Haim Ginott, suggested “bribes seldom, if ever, inspire continued efforts.” Alfie Kohn’s book, “Punished by Rewards” conveys a similar theme. Bribes don’t effectively motivate children in the long run. They buy temporary compliance, but do little to change the heart or long-term interest in the enterprise for which the reward has been given.

Still, cultural traditions have long been at odds with this advice. Schools have used accelerated reading (A.R.) points and pizzas to encourage children to read. For centuries, parents have likely used treats, money, or extra privileges to motivate children. Even workplaces use bonuses, and other rewards to motivate employees. So what’s the problem with bribes? And are all rewards bribes?

It seems that even God uses rewards. Pay your tithing and the windows of heaven will open (see Malachi 3:10). Keep the commandments and you’ll inherit eternal life (see D&C 14:7). Obey the Word of Wisdom and you’ll find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge (see D&C 89:18-21).

It’s important to understand that all rewards are not alike—and all rewards are not bribes. The nature, timing, and size of rewards can make a big difference. Some rewards—like God’s, are authentic or natural. They are based in eternal law and founded on truth. Such rewards have been predicated or affixed from the beginning (see D&C 130:20-21; 2 Nephi 2:10). The authentic reward for sharing is the inner satisfaction or light of Christ acknowledging that we have done right. The authentic reward for reading is the joy of the story. Rewards, like punishments, are most instructive when they are natural or authentic.

Still, some children may need some help to appreciate the more authentic reason for doing things. So at times, parents may use logical consequences (positive or negative) as a schoolmaster to help lead children to the higher laws or purposes. For example, if a child failed to come in for dinner when called because he wanted to continue to ride bikes with his friend—the natural consequence would be to go without dinner. But at times, parents spare children the natural consequences because of the broader consequences to the child and others. A hungry child might be painful to the whole family. An example of a logical consequent might be grounding the child from his bike—which was instrumental to the situation at hand.

The problem comes when parents use rewards or punishments that are neither authentic nor logical. They are arbitrary and have no connection to the situation. Too often parents have a standard arbitrary consequence regardless of the situation. They have one tool in their parenting toolbox. In the situation above, grounding a child from television or computer access would be an arbitrary consequence that lacks the instructive focus of natural or logical consequences.

Similarly, a logical reward for reading may be going to the library for another book or even seeing the movie version to compare with the book. Pizzas or other treats are arbitrary rewards unrelated to the situation. They are less instructive. They are less likely to change a child’s long-term interest or heart towards reading. They are external motivators rather than internal ones.

None-the-less, even external and arbitrary rewards influence behavior. But the goal of parenting is not manipulated obedience. Temporary compliance is not victory. The Prophet Moroni reminds us that gifts given grudgingly or without real intent profit us nothing (See Moroni 7:6-13). Our goal is to influence the hearts and minds of children in ways that they “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually. (See Mosiah 5:2). Parents can move towards this goal by considering the following:

1. **Always redirect to the authentic.** Rewards run deep in our culture and we can’t make every arbitrary reward go away. But parents can dismiss or minimize their value and redirect children to the authentic. For example, if your child won an art contest, we might say, “That’s a nice ribbon—but why is art your passion? How does it feel to create a painting like this? What do you love most about your painting?”

2. **Never eclipse the authentic.** The larger the reward—the more it feels like a payoff or bribe. With such rewards, children are more likely to attribute their reason for acting to the external reward instead of the internal authentic reward. They feel they've been bought and acted out of greed. Smaller rewards, on the other hand, are too little to fully explain a child's behavior. For example, children may receive a token donut for service provided, but it doesn't explain their reason for serving—it is still an act of service stemming from the goodness of their heart. Small rewards can acknowledge effort and show gratitude without being sizable enough to eclipse the authentic reason for acting.
3. **Timing is everything.** Rewards promised before the action can feel manipulative. Do this and I'll give you an ice-cream. Unpromised rewards given in surprise after the action feels appreciative. For example, we might say, "Wow! We worked hard together—let's go for ice cream!" Since they were informed of the reward only after the desired action—it did not influence or manipulate the desire to act—it was still an act of goodness from the heart. After-the-fact rewards can reinforce behavior and demonstrate gratitude. But even after-the-fact rewards should be small so they don't detract from the authentic. Many Good Samaritans have felt discomfort when their good deeds have been overly praised in the limelight.
4. **Age and maturity is a consideration.** While the goal is to help children appreciate natural rewards and be motivated internally, external rewards may be temporarily appropriate for some young children and those lacking cognitive maturity. For such children, the more obvious external rewards can encourage practice or behaviors that help children develop skills and experience successes that in time can become self-reinforcing. But even with young children, take the time to teach the authentic reasons for our actions and wean children from external reinforcers as soon as possible.
5. **The best rewards aren't physical/material.** Consumer thinking and materialism runs deep in our culture. When considering rewards, we often think of "things"—treats, gifts, money, etc. When things are promoted as rewards, children learn to value things over more important—but less tangible rewards. Consider rewarding children with your time, activities, or new expanding opportunities. This will help children value relationships, opportunities, and doing—over owning.

Remember, our goal as parents is to help our children develop enduring interest and behaviors that will open the windows of heaven in their behalf. Actively teaching, modeling, and cultivating a love for the internal and authentic reasons for acting will help children become agents unto themselves. The scriptures teach, "Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward." (D&C 58:27-28).