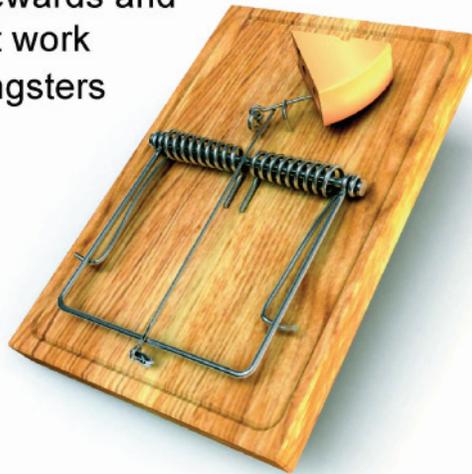


The Behavior Modification Trap

Why tangible rewards and
incentives don't work
with some youngsters



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A Note from the Author:

This little e-booklet, *The Behavior Modification Trap*, is actually the sixth chapter from my current work-in-progress, *The Changing Behavior Book*. It occurred to me this chapter might make a great, stand-alone e-booklet.

Can you identify?

Have you ever offered a youngster a super deal of some kind if they would do a task, only to have them refuse? If it's a youngster who is oppositional, difficult, and defiant by nature, they seem to delight more in *refusing* than accepting—regardless of the offer.

It doesn't make sense, does it?

Why is this so?

Why do tangible rewards and incentives fail miserably with some youngsters, frustrating parents and teachers in the process? More importantly, what *will* work to garner more cooperation and compliance with these youngsters? These questions and issues are addressed in *The Behavior Modification Trap*.

An additional resource

If the topic of working more effectively with oppositional and defiant youngsters interests you, consider subscribing to the *ODD Management Digest*. This email resource is published monthly. Each issue contains about 10-14 pages packed full of up-to-date insights, ideas, and interventions that parents, educators, and counselors can use immediately. Many of the hints and tips come directly from leading experts in working with difficult youngsters. (The *Digest* will also let folks know when *The Changing Behavior Book* is released.)

To subscribe, go to <http://www.trafficwave.net/lcp/docspeak/digest> and follow the brief instructions. *The ODD Management Digest* will show up in your email each month for as long as you care to receive it.

—JDS

The Behavior Modification Trap

Why tangible rewards and incentives don't work with some youngsters

by Dr. James Sutton, Psychologist

Parents and teachers have used tangible rewards and incentives with children and teens for years. The time eventually comes, however, when these reinforcers backfire with difficult and defiant youngsters. At first glance, the reasons for the ineffectiveness of tangible rewards and incentives seem puzzling and unclear.

The frustration on the faces of the adults, however, couldn't be clearer.

I once received an email from a concerned mother of an ODD child. Instead of asking for ideas for managing her son's defiance and noncompliance, she specifically requested the best behavior modification approaches (the systematic use of rewards and incentives) to use with the boy.

She was surprised, I'm sure, at my reply. I suggested to her that I might not recommend any behavior modification interventions at all. (To read more about this particular situation, check out the article, *TREATMENT for ODD: Behavior Modification, or Something Else?* in the "Free Articles" link on my website at <http://www.docspeak.com>.)

Is it Oversold?

Probably. When I was taking all those Special Education classes for teachers in college, the rave of the age was behavior modification. It grew from the work and research of Dr. B.F. Skinner. The message of behavior modification stated you could direct

behavior and instill learning through the manipulation of reinforcement (rewards) given in appropriate “schedules” (amounts and intervals). The “secret” in making behavior modification work effectively was the establishment of clear baselines and systematic reinforcement schedules, a process referred to as contingency management.

(Done appropriately, behavior modification is a *lot* of work. I know; I had to do a project in one of those classes. I used pieces of cheese to teach my dog to come whenever I blew a whistle. I charted it and everything. It worked; McKeeford eventually came running on the first tweet of the whistle. In fact, it worked so well that, for weeks after the project was over, *any* whistle had him looking for cheese!)

Limitations

At one point, behavior modification was billed as the panacea for changing behavior. After all if you’ve ever seen a chicken play basketball or watch the amazing stuff Shamu can do, it’s pretty impressive. As an intervention with oppositional and defiant youngsters, however, behavior modification has its limitations, although there are folks around who think differently. In my opinion, the limitations are not in the process of how authentic behavior modification employing rewards and incentives are used, rather in the purpose and application of the person implementing the intervention.

Read just about anything I’ve written over the last 30 years or so and you won’t see much on charts, stars, and rewards for improving behavior or responsibility. It’s not because those things are inherently bad or wrong. It’s that, for some youngsters, an approach based primarily on earning rewards for compliance is too incomplete to foster lasting change and promote a mindset

for keeping the change going and lasting. Add to this the problem of dealing with Johnny when he doesn't get his star, widget, or whatever, and pitches a wall-eyed fit about it.

Issues to Consider

Behavior modification has its place in supporting and sustaining changed behavior, but doesn't have *all* the answers. In some cases, it might have characteristics that actually *feed* into a youngster's willful defiance. Here are some things to think about when considering tangible rewards and incentives as an intervention for difficult and defiant behavior.

Depth of intervention: Behavior modification manages surface behaviors (the behaviors you actually see) pretty well, but it doesn't go very deep. It can encourage desired behaviors to be repeated, but behavior modification doesn't take into account what might be fueling the defiance in the first place.

ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) as a condition rarely occurs in isolation. Research has shown that as many as half of the youngsters diagnosed as ODD also could be significantly depressed (Wenning et al., 1993). In fact, an additional diagnosis of depression could be given. (We'll stay with depression for the sake of this point, but a number of conditions and diagnoses can coexist with ODD.)

So what does this mean exactly? It means, although behavior modification could improve some of the behaviors of a depressed and defiant youngster, there's a risk of missing a better opportunity for intervention. It's also possible the child or teen could think we care *only* that they behave and comply—that we are oblivious to how awful and miserable they feel. Result: the behavior worsens.

If a child is defiant *and* depressed, we should work on the depression first. The defiance might just go away. This is precisely why a comprehensive psychological assessment, complete with projective testing, is so helpful.

Unseen payoffs: What about the power of “invisible” payoffs that counter your efforts? What if we fail to see what *other* reinforcers are already on the plate? If we tell Johnny that he can have an ice cream cone at the end of the day if he doesn’t bloody Mark’s nose again like yesterday, how do we deal with the fact that bloodying another kid’s nose was exactly what *made* Johnny’s day yesterday?

And he’s supposed to trade *that* for an ice cream cone?

What we have here is a situation where, if the particular reinforcer didn’t work, we might wonder if the promise of an ice cream cone was enough. Folks, I can guarantee there will be times when the promise of a Mercedes-Benz will *not* be enough. Unseen payoffs are tremendously powerful.

Here’s the good news. If you can account for all the invisible payoffs, just about *anything* you put on the plate has a decent chance of working.

(This isn’t the first mention of the power of invisible payoffs for inappropriate behavior, nor will it be the last. Unseen and unrecognized payoffs are a major issue in managing bad behavior.)

A skyrocketing ante: What if the youngster keeps uping the ante? One downside to offering rewards for performance occurs when a youngster plays *Let’s Make a Deal*, wanting *more* goodies for the same compliance. (I call this *Taking Hostages*.) At what point is this hopeful limit-testing on the child’s part versus it becoming a juvenile version of extortion?

The thinking part: Is behavior modification cognitive enough? Does it actively engage thinking and reasoning in achieving compliance and change? For years, I thought I was alone in posing this question. I then attended a program by Dr. Ross Greene, author of *The Explosive Child* (1998) and the more recent, *Lost at School* (2007). Dr. Greene posed the same question and answered it: “With difficult kids, behavior modification *isn't* cognitive enough.” It addresses behavior, not thought.

Consider how you could put some one-celled critters on one side of a Petri dish and their favorite food on the other side. What will they do? They will cross the dish and have lunch, right? Is that behavior modification? Yes, it is. And just how cognitive and “smart” do those little guys have to be to get to the food? Answer: only smart enough to know they’re hungry!

What does this mean about using contingency management and reinforcers with children and adolescents, who have infinitely more cognitive horsepower than what’s floating around in the petri dish? It means youngsters can *see* through our intent, *examine* our motives, and *decide* whether or not they want to play at all.

Why should we be so surprised when we make an attractive offer and the youngster says or does, “No!”

Use of rewards: Should we even be offering tangible rewards for desired behavior?

In his monthly newsletter, Dr. Marv Marshall, founder of the *Raise Responsibility System* and author of the books *Discipline without Stress, Rewards or Punishment* and *Parenting without Stress* (Piper Press, 2001 & 2010), told about a school administrator that changed the way students raise funds for the school’s charities.

In this school students are not offered rewards, prizes, or incentives for bringing in the most money for the charity. The school didn't want students raising funds motivated *only* by the tangible benefits they could receive. (Correct me if I'm wrong, but it's not at all unusual for a charity to come to a school assembly and spend more time showing students the prizes they could win than sharing the work and function of the charity. Yes, it's the way to raise the healthiest amount of cash, but what's the message?)

In order to help students understand that doing something good for a worthy charity is its own reward, this school administrator asked the charities to take whatever they would spend on prizes and add it to the donations raised by that school. Yeah, it's a radical approach, perhaps bringing in fewer funds, but it does serve to put things back into an intended perspective.

It's a mistake to expect all young people, especially the youngest ones, to have a complete grasp of the need for benevolence and kind-hearted gestures. Most kids really can't identify with or grasp the notion of what it would feel like to go hungry for days. Still, it is important to encourage them to act in ways that are noble and selfless, and that the best rewards come from the inside.

What about other values, like kindness, honesty, and caring? Do we stand to cheapen these gestures if we offer material rewards?

Desired rewards: Just because we're fond of a certain reward doesn't mean it will appeal to the youngster. This is especially true with tangible reinforcement. For instance, if someone offered my wife a chocolate milkshake as a reward when she was a child, it wouldn't work. She is *highly* allergic to chocolate.

In the working world employees often will work harder for a job title or a parking spot than for a raise in salary. We're not all the same, and we don't all want the same things. (Wouldn't it be arrogant on my part to assume I *knew* what everyone wanted?)

As a rule, activities and opportunities to do those activities appeal more to young people than tangible incentives. (This is good news because they are also less expensive.) These kinds of incentives could include ten minutes of free time on the computer or the opportunity to go down to the first grade and help younger students with reading.

A long, long wait: Do we really want to *wait* on behavior modification? The whole premise of behavior modification is incremental changes in behavior over time. But what if we find ways to change some behaviors quickly? Wouldn't that be better than dragging out the change over weeks and months?

Selling off of responsibility: One hidden drawback of relying too strongly on behavior modification is that it can shift responsibility for behavioral change from the child onto the adult (or be perceived as such). A frustrated parent or teacher can blame themselves for a youngster's bad behavior, feeling they failed to find the right behavior management "key" to unlock compliance. Moreover, the child can see it the same way, and depend on the adult to change their behavior.

What Needs to Happen?

I'm not at all suggesting we toss out all tangible rewards and incentives; they have their place. My wife taught developmentally handicapped youngsters for 14 years. In knowing her students were limited in cognitive and reasoning skills, she emphasized motivators and rewards they could see, touch, and

experience. They *needed* to be tangible. But she also knew and understood that authentic change in a youngster's behavior was based more on relationships than any other single factor. The strength of a relationship will trump rewards every time. And that hasn't changed since we were writing on stone tablets.

Emphasize responsibility: My educator friend in California, Dr. Marv Marshall, put this whole behavior modification thing into sharp focus in his September 8, 2007 email newsletter, *Promoting Responsibility and Learning*, #74. (To subscribe to this excellent resource, go to <http://www.marvinmarshall.com>.) That issue contained the following contribution from an educator. It squarely addresses one of the just-discussed drawbacks of using rewards and incentives to modify behavior.

One of the oddest conversations I ever had with a child was with a very bright second grader. He had a history of misbehavior at school with lots of office time and suspensions. At the beginning of the year, I sat with him after a minor infraction and, during our conversation, I casually said something like, "Well, you know I can't MAKE you behave. That's something you'll have to want to do for yourself. You get to think about your behavior and what you do here in the classroom." (Not my exact words, but something like that.)

At this the boy looked at me and said, "But you HAVE to make me behave. That's your job!"

We must have spent about 15 minutes in a conversation that ended up centering not only on the misbehavior that had occurred, but on an idea that he had somehow picked up from kindergarten and first grade: It was MY job to be in charge of his behavior.

He pointed out that I should or could use behavior charts (he knew of several) or prizes or stickers. He had all sorts of suggestions for me of ways I could change his behavior. It was hysterical, and he was not very pleased initially that I was not interested into buying into any of his stuff.

Needless to say, although it took some time, this child did eventually figure out how to be in charge of his behavior in our classroom. I think and hope the lessons he learned serve him better in the future than his notion of teachers controlling him. But boy, what an eye-opener for what we do to kids with some of our behavior systems.

Hey, there's not much I could add to that. Responsibility for change *must* rest with the youngster.

Appeal to reason: Some kids are unreasonable; that's a given. Most, however, are more willing to comply when the request seems reasonable and fair.

When I was in the service, I was taught to give a reason for a direct order whenever possible. It left the impression there was a purpose to the order, not just some NCO spouting off:

Smith and Jones, move these six file cabinets to the center of the room. A crew is coming to paint the walls.

A parent can do the same thing, and perhaps sweeten the pot in the process:

Susan, you've been wanting me to take you fishing. That would be fun, but those tackle boxes are a mess. Everything is one big tangle. If you think you could straighten them out by Saturday, we'll go to the lake.

Here's another:

Todd, you've been wanting to go out and practice your driving, but I need to finish fixing this garbage disposal, then I have to cut the grass. If you'll get started on the yard while I wrap up this job, I think we could work in a little drive time.

Notice how both of these examples offered an activity (rather than a tangible incentive) the parent *knew* was valuable to Susan and Todd. Plus, there was no payoff or inconvenience to others if the youngster *didn't* comply.

A reasonable request doesn't even have to contain a direct payoff for the youngster:

My goodness; time is slipping away. Grandma will be here in less than an hour and I'm not anywhere near ready. Marty, would you please put these sheets in the washer with one capful of detergent? I'd really appreciate it.

Wouldn't it take Marty more time to avoid the task than simply do it? It pays to set this up with a quick, short task. It also helps if Mom will again express her appreciation later.

Teachers, similar opportunities for quick and cooperative compliance abound in the classroom, also.

Creatively encourage compliance: It's difficult to "buy" a stubborn and difficult kid, regardless of what's on the plate. (I've always said that a much bigger payoff is stuck to the *bottom* of that plate: the option of frustrating us.) Here are a few ideas that serve to reduce the size of the plate, or perhaps eliminate the plate entirely.

Offer a choice: Choice always looks better to the youngster because, regardless of what the adult offers, there's an option. Choice is the most basic form of empowerment. It substantially reduces conflict and, in most instances, it works well.

One way to "load" a choice is to make one or more of them ridiculously undesirable:

Barbara, I have three chores that need to be done. You can pick one. The bathrooms need to be cleaned, the trash needs to be taken out, and ALL the windows need to be washed. Your choice.

Barbara's smart. She knows she can take out the trash in less than 60 seconds. This strategy succeeds because it gains compliance, even though the effort is minimal. Besides, the windows were never a big issue in the first place. (But they *did* get the trash moved.)

Another "spin" on choice is the parent's offer to take the remaining choice:

Barbara, I have two chores that need to be done. The bathrooms need to be cleaned and the trash needs to be taken out. If you'll pick one and get to it, I'll take the other. What'll it be?

How could a parent be more reasonable and fair than that?

The same concept works in the classroom, also. The teacher prepares two or more assignments. One has four problems or questions on the page; the other has 20. The student is instructed to select one assignment and get started.

Another idea on offering choice opens options for beginning and completing the task:

Robert, you can do that chore right now, you can do it in an hour, or you can do it right after dinner. Just let me know what you decide.

Provide a discard: A discard is more powerful than a tangible payoff because it immediately reduces the task load, the object of defiance in the first place. In using this strategy with my son, I would set a condition to the discard:

Jamie, I have five chores I need for you to do. If you can finish three of them by five o'clock, you can hand two of them back to me.

Being his mother's child also, he *always* went for the sale. I don't think he ever realized I only wanted him to do *three* chores, not five.

Suggest a compliance "discount": This intervention is a bit different from offering a discard in that the youngster has to demonstrate compliance to earn the payoff. The bottom line is the same: the task is reduced.

This is easy to implement at school:

Students, you have your assignment; there are ten problems on the page. I'm going to set two timers to go off. One will go off in the first half of the activity; the other will go off during the second half. If either or both timers catch you being in your seat and doing your work, you can write "free" next to a problem of your choice.

Students figure it out pretty quickly that if they will simply do their work, they will be less of it to do.

This strategy works well at home, also. The parent sets a timer during chore time. If the timer catches the youngster doing an assigned chore, he can return one chore to the parent.

Make ‘em think: Sometimes the best reinforcement is one that is not promised at all. You read it correctly—not promised *at all*; it’s thinly inferred. What I’m suggesting maximizes reasoning and challenges the expectations of the youngster. In essence, it deals effectively with defiant behavior by removing payoffs for the defiance.

By way of an example, let’s say a teacher promises to give each student who finishes their work before class is over an ice cream sandwich at lunch. That’s not a bad deal; she’ll probably have a few takers.

(She already knows what her most defiant student is going to say: “That’s okay; I don’t like ice cream” or “I’m allergic to dairy products.” There’s another downside of offering tangible rewards to defiant youngsters.)

Here’s a better deal, and it will give the teacher more results with a *lot* less effort. She promises them nothing at all. Nothing!

During lunch she’s walking around the cafeteria handing out the treats to the three or four students who managed to turn in their work before they went to lunch. She whispers to those students why she’s giving out the ice cream sandwiches, deliberately making the whole gesture low-key.

Do you think this will get around? Only like wildfire. On the next day there will be students sitting there wondering if the ice cream sandwich deal is “On” or “Off”. The teacher, making a little room for them to turn it over in their minds, offers no clear clues. It *might* happen. More students will turn their work in—just in case.

Another teacher offered her students little more than encouragement. It worked well, also. She validated their compliance before they *started* a task. (How's that for a novel approach?)

She would give her students an assignment then, while they still had only their heading on their paper, she circulated through the class, writing a brief comment on no more than three or four papers:

Great job! Good work! Excellent!

She would add her initials with a flourish and continue to walk down the aisles. It wasn't long before her comments on a blank paper drew a question or two:

Miss, you just wrote "Great Job!" on my paper!

Yes, I did.

But, I haven't done anything yet.

But didn't you intend to do a great job on that paper?

I did.

There you go. (as she kept walking)

Over the course of a school week, the teacher would write a comment on every student's paper.

This little strategy tends to confuse youngsters, but in a positive way. If they decide not to do their work after the teacher writes good comments on their paper, they're pretty sure the comments might stop. To stop or not do the work would be to show defiance in the face of a kind and generous gesture. It would require "unreasonable" defiance students could not justify. Most youngsters won't risk it. Besides, they *like* having the teacher write nice things on their paper. (And, yes, there are those few who have trouble with *positive* comments.)

It's not difficult to use the same idea at home. A parent could check while the child is doing their chore and make a positive comment about it. They could even offer to finish the chore for the child, or they could praise the work by offering the youngster a coupon for a chore holiday. There are lots of possibilities.

A Final Thought

There are those who might say the interventions offered here are actually a type of behavior modification because of the intent of the strategy. No argument there. The purpose of these interventions is to encourage compliance while minimizing the drawbacks of using tangible rewards and incentives.

For additional ideas on generating more compliance with difficult youngsters, go to the library and check out *If My Kid's So Nice, Why's He Driving ME Crazy?*, *101 Ways to Make Your Classroom Special*, and *What Parents Need to Know About ODD* (Sutton, 1997, 1999 and 2007 respectively). You can also find these books at <http://www.friendlyoakspublications.com>.