

Motivation, Positive Reinforcement, and Reward Systems (and When they Don't Work)

*By Alexandra Berube
bostontutoringservices.com*

When *Max was in Kindergarten, our classroom had a sticker chart, and you would receive a sticker for each academic block that you conducted to the best of your abilities. There were four academic blocks each day, with a maximum of four stickers that you could receive per day. I would not remove a sticker for poor behavior, because I do not believe in negative reinforcement. You would either receive a sticker for positive behavior, or not receive a sticker at all. Once you received 30 stickers, you got a prize from the prize bag (filled with items I purchased from the dollar store).

The sticker chart worked really well for most of the students, especially those for whom positive reinforcement made a huge difference. They would gather around the sticker chart eagerly to see how many stickers they had received that day, and it even became a math activity where they would count up to see how many stickers they still needed to get to 30 (this utilizes both addition and subtraction concepts).

For Max, the sticker chart worked sometimes. It worked when he was slightly struggling with an academic task that I knew he was capable of doing, and this extra motivation could propel him towards finishing the goal of completing that task. But it did not do much for behavior modification. If Max found the task too challenging or too boring, a sticker on his chart was not enough compensation for him to want to work on the task at hand. He would roll off his chair onto the ground, toss his pencil, or find any other way to avoid physically doing the task.

I still found the sticker chart worthwhile, because for those skills that I knew he was at the cusp of mastering, it just took a bit more incentive to keep him motivated. But there was always that tipping point where he just wasn't motivated enough by a sticker to actually work.

In cases where the sticker didn't work, it became a game of how much can I change the activity so that it still meets its goal while framing it in a more approachable way for Max? Could I change the topic so that it was still testing the same skill but using a topic that he loved?

Now when we work on triple-digit addition and subtraction, multiplication, geometry, etc., I always frame the activity around a topic that he enjoys. If there are two chicken houses, and three chickens in each chicken house, how many chickens are there? When we were doing story problems for addition and subtraction, where he had to write his own story problems, the problem became about bear attacks: "If three people are attacked by bears, and then four more people are attacked by bears, how many people are attacked by bears altogether?"

When we focused on geometry, addition, and multiplication recently and worked with a floor plan of a home, I mentioned how Max was drawing doors on all of the rooms, and how that would be so great if there were zombies attacking, because there would be so many ways to escape. He started drawing doors all over the place and I asked him each time he drew a door what the measurements would be, and then what the area of that door would be, and then what the perimeter would be. This way he could enter his own world of the interests and topics that excite him, integrating the skills at hand almost so that he does not notice he is learning. He said the doors were 2 feet by 2 feet (small enough that we could escape through them but the zombies would be too tall and wouldn't know to duck down), and then said, the area is 4! He just multiplied it spontaneously without my asking. The learning became part of the creativity.

Behavior modification in the form of shaping your lessons around the topics that interest your child is usually the most motivating way to keep them on task. Of course, this means altering your curriculum when you're in a larger classroom. But you're just not going to be able to keep a kid on task if they have no connection to the material. Stickers will not be enough to entice them. You can try rewards at the end of the lesson, such as, once you finish this worksheet we will...(Fill in the blank), but this level of forethought is going to be challenging for younger students. They're not going to be able to keep that goal in mind long enough to keep going on the immediate task. The intense frustration around working on a concept that they do not enjoy will overpower that forethought.

As children get older, they will be able to push through this frustration more and more, but for very young children where the behavior modification strategies of sticker charts and positive reinforcement don't do enough, it's best to try to mask an activity by wrapping a favorable interest around it. These children want to learn, and they are so excited when they get to focus on something they are interested in, that with that added effort on the part of the teacher or tutor, they will be able to tackle tasks that should be more challenging than they would normally be able to do. They will push through their frustration in a surprising way and surge forward in their capacity to develop these skills.

*Name has been changed.

Note: Max has Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum

About Alexandra Berube

Alexandra is the Managing Director of Boston Tutoring Services, a tutoring company that offers one-to-one in-home tutoring in Massachusetts. She is also a former Kindergarten teacher who also tutors students in grades K-8, in all subject areas, including test preparation.

<http://bostontutoringservices.com/>

This article by Alexandra was written in reply to a question she received:

"Hello!

Thank you SO SO much for your articles. They have been such a blessing! I just started working as an aide to a 5 year old girl with Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum. She is in a mainstream Kindergarten classroom but we also do lots of one-on-one sessions with other Special Service therapists. She is a very joyful little girl and a social butterfly. She loves people!

Kindergarten is a full day. Most days she is very, very compliant but lately, we've had a lot of discipline issues in the afternoon. We have a 'Star System' (you receive a star for good behavior or we take away a star for bad behavior) but this doesn't entice her either way. Do you have any suggestions on what you did for discipline with Max?

The afternoons are the hardest because she's so tired. And when she gets tired, she gets frustrated. I'm trying to be proactive by thinking of things that entice her so she'll want to do her work.

Thanks for any info you can provide! I've really appreciated your insights this far :)"