

alfie kohn punished by rewards

alfie kohn punished by rewards is a concept that challenges traditional behaviorist approaches to motivation, discipline, and education. Alfie Kohn, a renowned author and speaker on human behavior and education, critically examines the use of rewards and punishments as tools for shaping behavior. His work argues that relying on external incentives can undermine intrinsic motivation and lead to negative outcomes in both learning environments and interpersonal relationships. This article explores the core ideas behind Kohn's critique, the psychological principles involved, and practical implications for educators, parents, and leaders. By understanding the nuances of why Alfie Kohn believes individuals are punished by rewards, readers can reconsider common approaches to motivation and discipline. The following sections provide a comprehensive overview of Alfie Kohn's theory, evidence supporting his claims, and alternatives to reward-based systems.

- Understanding Alfie Kohn's Critique of Rewards and Punishments
- The Psychological Impact of Rewards on Motivation
- Evidence Supporting the Negative Effects of Rewards
- Alternatives to Reward-Based Motivation
- Practical Applications in Education and Parenting

Understanding Alfie Kohn's Critique of Rewards and

Punishments

Alfie Kohn's critique centers on the premise that external rewards and punishments can be detrimental rather than beneficial to fostering genuine motivation and ethical behavior. He argues that when people are motivated primarily by external incentives, their engagement becomes superficial and task-oriented rather than driven by interest or personal values. This viewpoint challenges the traditional behaviorist model, which posits that behavior can be shaped effectively through reinforcement and consequences.

The Concept of “Punished by Rewards”

The phrase “punished by rewards” encapsulates Kohn's argument that the use of rewards can paradoxically punish individuals by diminishing their intrinsic motivation. According to Kohn, rewards may create dependency on external validation, reducing curiosity, creativity, and willingness to take risks. This leads to a transactional mindset, where individuals perform tasks only to obtain rewards rather than for the inherent satisfaction of the activity.

Criticism of Behaviorist Foundations

Kohn critiques foundational behaviorist theories, particularly those stemming from B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning. While behaviorism emphasizes the power of reinforcement and punishment in shaping behavior, Kohn highlights its limitations in addressing complex human motivations and moral development. He stresses that behaviorism's focus on external control can undermine autonomy and fail to cultivate meaningful engagement.

The Psychological Impact of Rewards on Motivation

Exploring the psychological mechanisms behind motivation reveals why Alfie Kohn's argument against reward-based systems holds significant weight. Intrinsic motivation—the drive to engage in an activity for its own sake—is a crucial component of sustained learning and personal growth. Rewards, while

initially effective at eliciting certain behaviors, often erode this intrinsic drive over time.

Overjustification Effect

The overjustification effect is a key psychological phenomenon that supports the idea of being “punished by rewards.” When external rewards are introduced for activities that individuals already find enjoyable, their intrinsic interest tends to decrease. This occurs because the reward shifts the perceived reason for engaging in the task from internal satisfaction to external gain.

Impact on Autonomy and Competence

Self-determination theory posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential psychological needs. Rewards can interfere with autonomy by imposing external control, which diminishes a person’s sense of volition. Moreover, rewards tied to performance may undermine feelings of competence if individuals attribute their success solely to incentives rather than their skills or effort.

Evidence Supporting the Negative Effects of Rewards

Empirical research and case studies provide robust evidence that supports Alfie Kohn’s stance on the harmful effects of rewards. Studies across educational, workplace, and social settings illustrate how rewards can reduce intrinsic motivation, creativity, and ethical behavior.

Research in Educational Settings

Numerous experiments have shown that students who are rewarded for completing tasks or achieving high grades often exhibit decreased interest in learning once the rewards are removed. This effect is particularly pronounced in activities that children initially find enjoyable or engaging.

Workplace Studies

In organizational contexts, reliance on bonuses, commissions, and other extrinsic rewards can lead to short-term performance boosts but may harm long-term motivation and job satisfaction. Workers may focus narrowly on rewarded tasks, neglecting other important but unrewarded aspects of their jobs.

Ethical and Social Implications

Rewards may also encourage unethical behavior, such as cheating or cutting corners, to obtain the incentive. Additionally, they can foster competition rather than collaboration, damaging social relationships and trust.

Alternatives to Reward-Based Motivation

In light of the limitations and potential harms of rewards, Alfie Kohn advocates for alternative approaches that emphasize intrinsic motivation and human-centered values. These alternatives aim to nurture genuine engagement and ethical behavior without relying on external controls.

Promoting Intrinsic Motivation

Strategies to foster intrinsic motivation include providing meaningful choices, encouraging mastery, and connecting tasks to personal interests or goals. Supporting autonomy and competence helps individuals find satisfaction in the process rather than external outcomes.

Collaborative and Supportive Environments

Creating environments that emphasize collaboration over competition can help build trust and social relatedness. Encouraging open communication and shared goals nurtures intrinsic motivation and reduces the need for external rewards.

Focus on Learning and Growth

Shifting focus from performance outcomes to learning processes can reduce anxiety and pressure. Emphasizing effort, curiosity, and improvement over grades or rewards aligns with Kohn's philosophy and enhances motivation.

Practical Applications in Education and Parenting

Alfie Kohn's insights on being punished by rewards have significant implications for educational practices and parenting techniques. Implementing his recommendations requires thoughtful changes to traditional reward and punishment systems.

Alternatives to Grades and Incentives in Schools

Schools can move away from grade-centric approaches and reward-based behavior management by adopting formative assessments, narrative feedback, and intrinsic motivation strategies. Encouraging student choice and self-assessment fosters ownership of learning.

Positive Discipline in Parenting

Parents can apply Kohn's principles by focusing on respectful communication, problem-solving, and natural consequences rather than rewards or punishments. This approach supports children's autonomy and internalizes values such as responsibility and empathy.

Creating Motivating Environments

Whether in classrooms or at home, cultivating environments that value curiosity, creativity, and cooperation helps counteract the negative effects of reward systems. Emphasizing relationships and growth supports long-term motivation and well-being.

1. Understand the drawbacks of reward and punishment systems as outlined by Alfie Kohn.
2. Recognize the psychological effects of external incentives on intrinsic motivation.
3. Evaluate empirical evidence demonstrating the limitations of rewards.
4. Explore alternative motivation strategies that promote autonomy and competence.
5. Apply these principles in educational and parenting contexts for sustainable motivation.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Alfie Kohn and what is his stance on using rewards as punishment?

Alfie Kohn is an American author and lecturer known for his criticism of traditional education practices. He argues that using rewards as a form of punishment or motivation is ineffective and can undermine intrinsic motivation.

What does Alfie Kohn mean by 'punished by rewards'?

By 'punished by rewards,' Alfie Kohn refers to the idea that offering rewards to control behavior can backfire, causing people to feel manipulated or less motivated internally, which ultimately punishes their natural desire to learn or perform.

Why does Alfie Kohn believe rewards are detrimental in education?

Kohn believes rewards shift the focus from learning and personal growth to merely obtaining external

incentives, which reduces students' intrinsic motivation and curiosity.

How does Alfie Kohn suggest educators should motivate students instead of using rewards?

Kohn advocates for fostering intrinsic motivation by creating engaging, meaningful learning experiences and encouraging autonomy, competence, and relatedness rather than relying on external rewards.

What psychological theory supports Alfie Kohn's criticism of rewards?

Self-Determination Theory supports Kohn's views, emphasizing that intrinsic motivation flourishes when people feel autonomous, competent, and connected, which external rewards can undermine.

Are there any studies that back Alfie Kohn's claims about rewards being harmful?

Yes, numerous studies have shown that extrinsic rewards can decrease intrinsic motivation, especially for tasks that require creativity or deep engagement, supporting Kohn's claims.

How does Alfie Kohn differentiate between punishment and rewards in behavior management?

Kohn argues that both punishment and rewards are forms of behavior control that can reduce intrinsic motivation; instead, he promotes understanding and addressing underlying reasons for behavior.

What are some alternatives to rewards suggested by Alfie Kohn for managing behavior?

Alternatives include encouraging self-reflection, promoting collaborative problem-solving, and reinforcing positive relationships rather than relying on contingent rewards.

How has Alfie Kohn's perspective influenced modern education practices?

Kohn's work has inspired educators to move away from reward-based systems and towards practices that promote intrinsic motivation, such as project-based learning and student-centered approaches.

Can rewards ever be used effectively according to Alfie Kohn?

Kohn generally cautions against rewards but acknowledges that if used, they should not be contingent or controlling, and should support autonomy and intrinsic interest rather than replace it.

Additional Resources

1. *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* by Alfie Kohn

This groundbreaking book challenges the conventional use of rewards and punishments in education, parenting, and workplace management. Kohn argues that such external motivators can undermine intrinsic motivation, creativity, and long-term engagement. He presents research and real-world examples to support a more humanistic approach to motivation.

2. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Daniel H. Pink

Pink explores the science of motivation and highlights the importance of autonomy, mastery, and purpose over traditional rewards and punishments. He presents compelling evidence that intrinsic motivation leads to higher performance and personal satisfaction. The book offers practical advice for fostering motivation in work and education.

3. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol S. Dweck

Dweck introduces the concept of fixed and growth mindsets, emphasizing how beliefs about ability influence motivation and achievement. She explains how praising effort rather than innate talent encourages resilience and a love of learning. The book complements Kohn's ideas by focusing on internal attitudes rather than external incentives.

4. *Drive to Learn: The Motivational Power of Intrinsic Curiosity* by Johnmarshall Reeve

This book delves into the role of intrinsic curiosity as a key driver of learning and motivation. Reeve discusses how environments that support autonomy and interest can enhance students' engagement. It aligns with Kohn's critique of extrinsic rewards by promoting natural curiosity in educational settings.

5. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan

Deci and Ryan offer a comprehensive overview of self-determination theory, which explains how autonomy, competence, and relatedness fuel intrinsic motivation. The book provides empirical research supporting the idea that external rewards can sometimes diminish motivation. It's a foundational text for understanding motivation psychology.

6. *Drive Out: How to Eliminate Rewards and Punishments to Create a Motivated Workforce* by Sarah Johnson

This practical guide focuses on transforming workplace culture by removing traditional reward and punishment systems. Johnson offers strategies for fostering intrinsic motivation, collaboration, and empowerment among employees. The book is a useful companion for those inspired by Kohn's theories in a business context.

7. *The Power of Praise and Positive Feedback* by Jane Nelsen

While Kohn is critical of certain types of praise, Nelsen explores how positive feedback can be used effectively to encourage growth and motivation. She distinguishes between controlling and supportive praise and provides techniques for nurturing intrinsic motivation. This book offers a balanced view on the role of encouragement.

8. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough

Tough investigates the non-cognitive skills that contribute to success, such as perseverance, curiosity, and self-control. He discusses how these qualities develop in environments that support intrinsic motivation rather than punitive or reward-based systems. The book reinforces many of Kohn's concerns about traditional educational practices.

9. *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* by William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick

This book introduces motivational interviewing, a counseling approach that emphasizes empathy and intrinsic motivation for change. It contrasts with reward-and-punishment models by fostering internal reasons for behavior change. The techniques described are useful in education, therapy, and coaching contexts.

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