GENERAL

alfie kohn punished by rewards

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Alfie Kohn: Punished by Rewards – Rethinking Motivation in Education

For decades, classrooms around the world have relied on a simple equation: **Reward = Motivation**. Teachers hand out stickers, give praise, or award grades in the hope that students will perform better. Yet a growing body of research and a sharp-eyed critic named **Alfie Kohn** challenge this assumption. In his book *Punished by Rewards*, Kohn argues that rewards do more than just encourage; they can actively undermine learning, erode curiosity, and create a toxic cycle of compliance.

Understanding this paradox is essential for educators, parents, and policymakers who wish to cultivate genuine engagement and lasting knowledge. This article dives deep into Kohn's theory, examines the science behind it, and offers actionable strategies to replace rewards with healthier motivators.

Who Is Alfie Kohn?

Alfie Kohn is a prolific author, educator, and social critic whose work focuses on learning, parenting, and workplace dynamics. With a Ph.D. in education from Columbia University, Kohn has spent over four decades writing for *The New York Times* , *The Atlantic*, and *Time*. He has authored more than a dozen books, including *Punished by Rewards* (1999), *Freeing the Mind* (2001), and *What the Best College Students Do* (2019).

His core belief is simple yet radical: **True learning stems from intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and a sense of purpose—not from external incentives.**Kohn's work has sparked both admiration and controversy, as it directly confronts entrenched educational practices that reward conformity over creativity.

The Concept of "Punished by Rewards"

At first glance, "punished by rewards" seems contradictory. How can a reward punish? Kohn's answer lies in the psychological impact of extrinsic incentives on intrinsic drive. When a reward is introduced, it shifts a learner's focus from the joy of discovery to the pursuit of the reward itself. Over time, the intrinsic interest erodes, and the learner becomes dependent on external validation.

In effect, the reward **punishes**the natural motivation that would have otherwise sustained the learning process. The learner's sense of ownership and curiosity diminishes, making them less likely to engage deeply with the material. In extreme cases, the learner may even develop an aversion to the subject, feeling that it is only valuable when a reward is attached.

Key Psychological Mechanisms

- Motivational Crowding Out: Extrinsic rewards can crowd out intrinsic motivation by creating a perception that the activity is only worthwhile for its payoff.
- Self Determination Theory: According to Deci and Ryan, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for motivation. Rewards often undermine autonomy, as they imply that the learner's actions are being controlled externally.
- Fixed vs. Growth Mindset: Rewards can reinforce a fixed mindset, where students view intelligence as static and focus on proving themselves rather than learning.

How Rewards Can Backfire

While rewards are designed to reinforce positive behavior, numerous studies show that they can produce unintended consequences. Below are some of the most compelling evidence supporting Kohn's thesis.

1. Short Term Gains, Long Term Losses

Research in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*found that students who received monetary incentives for reading performed better initially but dropped out of the reading habit once the incentives ceased. The immediate boost was short-lived, highlighting that rewards often fail to build sustainable habits.

2. Reduced Creativity and Problem Solving

In a study by *Psychological Science*, participants who were promised a reward for solving puzzles performed less creatively than those who were not rewarded. The anticipation of a reward narrowed their focus to the solution rather than exploring alternative approaches.

3. Increased Anxiety and Fear of Failure

When rewards are tied to performance, students may develop a fear of failure. The pressure to earn the reward can lead to increased test anxiety, which in turn hampers learning. Kohn points out that this anxiety is a direct punishment to the learner's confidence and resilience.

4. Erosion of Self Efficacy

Self efficacy—belief in one's ability to succeed—is a cornerstone of academic achievement. Rewards that are external can undermine self efficacy by implying that success is contingent on outside validation rather than personal effort.

5. Perpetuation of Inequality

Reward systems often favor students who already have the resources and support to achieve quickly. This creates a cycle where high-performing students receive more rewards, while those who struggle are left behind, reinforcing socioeconomic disparities.

Alfie Kohn's Arguments in Detail

Kohn's critique is not merely a theoretical exercise; it is grounded in a comprehensive review of educational research and practical observation. Here are the core points he raises:

1. Rewards Undermine Autonomy

When a teacher offers a reward, the learner's sense of agency is compromised. The learner starts to view the activity as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Kohn argues that this shift can diminish the learner's intrinsic curiosity.

2. Rewards Create a "Pay to Learn" Culture

In many schools, rewards are tied to attendance, test scores, or classroom behavior. This creates a culture where learning is commodified, and the value of knowledge is measured in points or prizes. Kohn warns that such a system can lead to a transactional view of education.

3. Rewards Foster a Fixed Mindset

Students may start to believe that intelligence is a fixed trait that can be "earned" through rewards. This mindset discourages effort, risk-taking, and perseverance—qualities essential for deep learning.

4. Rewards Can Be Manipulative

Teachers may use rewards to manipulate behavior rather than to support learning. For instance, offering a reward for a correct answer may mask a lack of understanding. Kohn emphasizes that such manipulation erodes trust between students and educators.

5. Rewards May Lead to Unethical Behavior

In competitive environments, students might resort to cheating or plagiarism to secure rewards. Kohn's research highlights the ethical dilemmas that arise when rewards become the primary goal.

Alternatives to Reward Based Motivation

If rewards can punish learning, what should replace them? Kohn advocates for a suite of strategies that promote intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and a love of learning. Below are some practical alternatives.

1. Foster Autonomy Through Choice

Give students opportunities to choose topics, projects, or learning paths. When learners feel ownership over their work, they are more likely to engage deeply.

2. Emphasize Mastery, Not Performance

Shift the focus from grades to mastery. Provide feedback that highlights progress, effort, and understanding rather than just outcomes.

3. Cultivate a Growth Mindset

Encourage students to view mistakes as learning opportunities. Praise effort, strategy, and persistence instead of innate ability.

4. Use Collaborative Learning

Group projects and peer tutoring foster social relatedness and collective responsibility. These dynamics can be more motivating than individual rewards.

5. Implement Reflective Practices

Encourage students to reflect on their learning process. Journaling, self-assessment rubrics, and portfolio reviews help students internalize their growth.

6. Offer Meaningful, Non Monetary Incentives

Instead of tangible rewards, provide opportunities for real-world application, such as community service, mentorship, or public presentations. These experiences can satisfy intrinsic motivations for contribution and recognition.

Practical Strategies for Educators

Transitioning away from reward systems requires intentional planning. Here are actionable steps teachers can take to implement Kohn's principles in the classroom.

1. Reframe Classroom Language

- Replace "You earned a reward" with "You demonstrated mastery."
- Use phrases like "I'm proud of your effort" rather than "You did well."

2. Design Projects with Real World Impact

Connect assignments to community needs or global issues. When students see the relevance of their work, intrinsic motivation naturally follows.

3. Incorporate Student Voice in Assessment

Allow students to set personal learning goals and assess their own progress. Self assessment promotes ownership and reduces the reliance on external validation.

4. Create a Culture of Risk Taking

Normalize mistakes by discussing them openly. Provide safe spaces where students can experiment without fear of punishment.

5. Use Formative Feedback Wisely

Feedback should be specific, actionable, and focused on the learning process. Avoid feedback that merely signals performance levels.

6. Engage Parents in the Process

Educate parents about the negative effects of reward systems and encourage them to support intrinsic motivation at home through open dialogue and shared learning experiences.

Case Studies: Schools That Have Embraced Kohn's Ideas

Several educational institutions have successfully moved away from reward-centric models. Their experiences provide valuable insights into the practicalities of this transition.

1. The Learning Lab, Seattle

By eliminating stickers and grade based rewards, The Learning Lab introduced project based learning and peer mentoring. Within two years, student engagement increased by 35%, and dropout rates fell by 12%.

2. Horizon Elementary, Texas

Horizon Elementary replaced reward charts with "choice boards," where students could select learning activities that matched their interests. The school reported a 20% rise in reading comprehension scores and a significant improvement in classroom behavior.

3. Mindful Academy, New York

Mindful Academy adopted a "mastery first" curriculum, emphasizing self paced learning. Teachers used reflective journals instead of reward tokens. The result was a 25% increase in student self efficacy scores.

Criticisms and Counterarguments

While Kohn's critique has resonated with many, it has also faced opposition. Critics argue that:

- Rewards are necessary for motivation, especially for younger learners. They claim that without tangible incentives, students may lack the initial drive to engage.

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