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# Train a Parent, Spare a Child

By BRUCE FEILER

SOMEONE asked me recently what my New Year's resolution was as a parent. Without thinking, I said, "more creative bribing."

I find the issue of bribing children — or to be more precise, the giving of blunt, uncreative rewards for desired behavior ("If you just stop kicking that seat in front of you on the plane, I'll give you 10 minutes of iPad time"; "Clean your room this weekend, I'll give you 10 bucks"; "If you use good manners at Grandma's house, I'll let you have an extra brownie") — to be one of the more nagging challenges of being a parent.

On one hand, I've read a small library of articles that have laid out with undeniable persuasiveness evidence that giving children tangible rewards — from money to sweets to an extra hour before bedtime — not only doesn't work in the long term, it actually has a negative effect on them. As early as the 1960s, Edward Deci, then a psychology graduate student at [Carnegie Mellon](#), showed that when external rewards are given, subjects "lose intrinsic interest for the activity." More recently, Daniel Pink, in his best-selling book "Drive," reviewed four decades of research and concluded that offering short-term incentives to elicit behavior is unreliable, ineffective and causes "considerable long-term damage." (The main downside: People perform the task merely to get the reward; when the reward is removed, they stop doing it.)

So I got it: bribing is bad. And yet I, my wife and nearly every other parent I know resorts to this tactic with appalling regularity. As one father said to me recently when we were discussing our approaches to parenthood: "My philosophy is simple: threats and bribes."

So what's a beleaguered parent to do? I reached out to some of the harshest critics of bribing for tips on making my resolution come true.

THE TALKING CURE Dr. Deci, now a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, said the biggest problem with tangible rewards is that they actually work, at least in the short run. "If you want somebody to do something, and if you have enough money, you can get them do it," he said. "Practically anyone, practically anything."

But with children, he pointed out, since you are trying to get them to do the behavior "more or less ongoingly for the rest of their lives," the technique will backfire unless you're prepared to offer the same reward every time. "You don't want them coming to you when they're grown," he said.

Dr. Deci recommends a three-step alternative. First, be clear about why what you're asking them do is important. Second, be interested in their point of view. "If it's something they hate doing, acknowledge that, tell them you understand it's not fun, yet the reason they need to do it is as follows," he said. Finally, communicate in a way that's not controlling. "Don't use words like 'should,' 'must' and 'have to,'" he said. "All of those things that convey to them you're a big person trying to push around a little person."

**MAKE IT A GAME** Alan Kazdin, the director of the Yale Parenting Center, said the problem with incentives is they focus too much attention on the desired result instead of the behavior that leads up to the result. "You can't throw rewards at behaviors that don't exist and get them," he said. "If someone says I will match your retirement fund if you perform a flamenco dance right now, my reaction is, 'Great, but it turns out I can't do that.' You have to develop the behavior very, very gradually."

For example, if you want your children to eat more vegetables, he said, instead offering them \$10 to do so (a technique I once stooped to, I confess), he suggested turning the process into a game. First, take the pressure off by telling them they don't have to eat vegetables now but just keep them on their plate. "You tell them they're probably going to want to eat vegetables when they're older, because there's a nice little challenge in there," he said.

Then you offer a point to whomever can put the least amount of vegetables on their fork. The next day you have a competition for who can touch the fork to their tongue and you escalate from there. "The research is very clear," he said. "Choice is related to getting compliance in any behavior, but psychologists distinguish between real choice and the illusion of choice. Real choice doesn't make a difference; it's the feeling of choice."

**SWITCH FROM IF-THEN REWARDS TO NOW-THAT** Mr. Pink said the problem with bribing is not the rewards; it's the contingency, which is a form of control. "Human beings have only two reactions to control," he said. "They comply or they defy. I don't think most parents want compliant children, and I don't think they want defiant children. They want children who are active, engaged and motivated by deeper things."

He recommends replacing what he calls if-then rewards with now-that rewards, meaning the prize is given spontaneously and after the fact. "Let's say your kid's room is a complete, utter mess, and you say, 'Fred, you really need to clean your room, or you're not going to be able to find anything,'" Mr. Pink said. "And maybe Fred does clean his room and really works hard at it. There's no harm in then saying, 'You did a great job. Let's go out for a milkshake.'"

Mr. Pink cautioned that after-the-fact rewards should be given sparingly, as they can quickly turn into an entitlement.

**PRAISE IS REWARD ENOUGH** If you do give rewards occasionally and unexpectedly, what type

of rewards are best? Is there a preferred choice among money, treats or quality time? Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford, said while there is no empirical research to suggest a qualitative difference, she recommends having children pick the reward rather than the adult foisting it on them. “It feels more integral to the process and gives the child a sense of ownership.”

Having said that, research clearly suggests that praise is usually a sufficient reward, she said. Dr. Dweck suggests parents make their praise specific, and focus on the process the child went through to achieve the behavior, not merely the behavior itself. “You could say, ‘I really liked the way you waited patiently for me to finish my phone call, because you understood that phone call was important,’ ” she said. “Or, ‘I really liked how you expressed gratitude to Grandma, just like you appreciate it when I thank you for doing something for me.’ ”

I was surprised and, frankly, relieved that all the experts I spoke with said it's O.K. to resort to old-fashioned, blunt rewards on occasion. If you simply must get that child on the plane or it will take off without you, or if you absolutely need that child to stop misbehaving so you can speak to the doctor, go ahead, bribe away. As Dr. Deci told me, “If you're under a lot of stress or in a bad place, then having a conversation at that moment is not going to work.”

But, he emphasized, don't let the situation end there. “You need to sit down the next afternoon when everyone's calm, talk it through from both sides, then discuss ways so the behavior doesn't happen again,” he said. “Always use the blow up as a learning moment the next day.”

And that, in the end, may be the biggest lesson of all. While my New Year's resolution started out as a way to get better results from my children, the real person I needed to retrain was myself.

*Bruce Feiler's latest book, “The Secrets of Happy Families,” will be published in February. “This Life” appears monthly.*