## “Arguments Against Positive Reinforcement”

**An excerpt from The Tough Kid Book (Rhode, Jenson, & Reavis; 2010)**

Some teachers think that it is wrong to use positive reinforcement. They believe that Tough Kids should exhibit appropriate behavior just because it is the responsible thing to do. They may view reinforcement as a crutch or bribe. It is true that many regular education students exhibit appropriate behavior because it is the responsible and “right” thing to do. Even so, the authors believe these students should still receive periodic positive reinforcement for displaying it. The authors have heard four basic arguments against using positive reinforcement in the form of incentives, rewards, and praise. We believe that none of these arguments are supported by research findings, in fact, result in poor practice in the behavior management for any student.

## The Bribery Argument

Some believe that rewards are just another form of bribery. As far as the bribery issue goes, we agree that teachers should not use bribery with any student. However, appropriately administered positive reinforcement is not a bribe. We define bribery as any inducement for an illegal or unethical act. Behaving well in a classroom and performing well academically are not illegal or illicit. However, there is a form of extraordinary bribery in which a student will misbehave on purpose if he does not receive a reward. In this situation, a student should never receive a reward. If he is given a reward in this case, he has just been reinforced for making a threat.

Similarly, the giving of a reward to an individual to stop misbehavior is inappropriate. Examples of this can be seen every day in grocery stores and restaurants when a parent gives her child a cookie if the child stops crying or throwing a tantrum. This use of a reward is never appropriate behavior to increase or maintain that behavior.

## The Fairness Argument

Some teachers believe that if they provide an incentive for good behavior to a Tough Kid, to be fair they must provide every student in the classroom with exactly the same incentive. This is a false way to define fairness. A better definition of fairness is to provide each student with what she needs to have equal chance for success. Wheelchairs are provided to students who have mobility problems so they can successfully access an education at school. It would be illogical to give all students in the school wheelchairs regardless of whether they need one. If a Tough Kid is highly unmotivated because of years of academic failure, he will need an external incentive system to keep him motivated as he acquires necessary academic skills.

## The Kills Internal Motivation Argument

Some teachers believe that if students are given external rewards, their internal motivation will be reduced. This argument has been promoted by Alfie Kohn in his book Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes (1999). The authors believe this approach offers a very limited review of the research literature on external rewards. Other scholars, such as Eisenberger and Cameron (1996), have conducted research reviews and meta-analysis that show rewards reduce internal motivation only “under limited conditions that are easily avoided” (p. 1164). If external rewards are given for performance that is positively improving, meaningful, and successful, external rewards enhance both external and internal motivation.

For example, we believe that not very many Tough Kids’ teachers would continue to work if they did not receive paychecks and that paying teachers for their work is the right thing to do. Similarly, most teachers (and other adults) like to be recognized for their accomplishments. These can be things as simple as a note from the principal in the teacher’s school mailbox expressing appreciation for filling in for an ill colleague who has been assigned lunch supervision duty. It might be a positive statement from a supervisor, in front of colleagues, recognizing what an effective and professional job the teacher did in managing a conference with an extremely difficult parent. Because behavior is reciprocal, people are likely to behave positively toward those who interact positively with them.

For use, the bottom line is that all students (and adults) need legitimate and appropriate reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is no more a crutch for students than money, credit cards, and public recognition are crutches for adults. On the other hand, if rewards are given for “busy work,” non-meaningful progress, or only for tasks that are too difficult and frustrating, internal motivation will be decreased.

## The Hooked on Praise Argument

Students who receive verbal praise for their performance or behavior will become “hooked” on praise. This is another argument made by Alfie Kohn in the book cited above. There is very little research evidence that students become overly dependent on praise. However, there is evidence, reviewed by Jenson, Olympia, Farley, and Clark (2004), that teachers underutilize praise with Tough Kids. Teacher praise is a very potent motivating force for students when used correctly. When asked to rate rewards, students select verbal praise as one of the most motivating incentives they can receive.

In addition to these arguments, some teachers believe that giving positive reinforcement takes too much time or is not sincere and genuine. A feeling of spontaneity and genuineness comes only with practice. The teacher who believed that giving routine reinforcement to students takes too much time or detracts from more important tasks is on the wrong track. With this attitude, classroom management will never be effective, especially with Tough Kids, and the teacher can count on spending a great deal of time and effort dealing with increased student misbehavior. Nothing is more important than positively reinforcing students for appropriate behavior! This is even more critical with Tough Kids than with other students.