



PARTNERS IN PARENTING
Internal Motivation

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DEVELOPING INTERNAL MOTIVATION: THE KEY TO RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR

How do we change irresponsible behavior that our children may have? When do we use external rewards (such as treats, toys, or events) and when do we use just praise? Internal motivation means that a child behaves in a responsible way because he/she knows that is the right thing for both him/her and others. There are different thoughts about using tangible rewards to help modify behavior, but no matter what your belief is on rewards, the ultimate goal is always to help foster internal motivation, the key to responsible behavior. This is not always easy, but here are some suggestions:

1. As parents, we need to understand that learning new tasks takes time. If we are asking our children to perform a task properly, they need to be shown what to do. Irresponsible behavior is likely to occur when a child is asked to do something he/she hasn't been adequately trained to do. When teaching a child to do something new, encourage him/her by saying something like, "You are learning this very quickly," or "You must be proud of yourself for the good job you are doing."
2. Children like and seek out those things that make them feel good. When teaching your child a new task, it is important to recognize improvement even if it is not yet adequate. Too often parents withhold recognition until a job is perfect. This does not encourage the child to persevere. Also, do not criticize the performance or the part that is not "up to par." Criticism seldom serves as a positive motivator. It usually elicits undesirable behavior.
3. Parents who notice their children doing something well and make statements like, "How proud you must be of yourself for doing such a good job," help their children associate feeling good with acting properly. These good feelings far outweigh any of the external rewards parents often feel are necessary to encourage children to act properly or perform a task correctly. There is more to be gained from saying, "You must be proud of yourself for accomplishing....," than from saying, "You did a good job." While the two statements may appear to be saying the same thing, the first statement not only encourages like the second one, but by identifying the accomplishment and including how the child feels, it helps to internalize motivation.
4. If you use tangible rewards or verbal praise, use them in conjunction with the statement, "You must be proud of yourself for (mention the accomplishment)." When you later withdraw the reward, your child will tend to continue to be motivated by the internal feeling of satisfaction.

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula for changing behavior. Every child is different, and behaviors serve different needs. I have found positive motivation is much more effective than criticism, but it must be directed to the specific task. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns about your child. Enjoy these coming vacation days with your child, and have a happy and healthy New Year.