**A Class Without Stickers! Are You Kidding Me?**

Description: This session explores mind-changing ideas to help you become a better leader without using reward systems. It explores the rationale behind the principle of not using stickers and other reward systems. Hear how rewards can negatively impact children long-term, create “other” control and affect kids’ connection with the Heavenly Father. Learn about how to “celebrate” accomplishments versus rewards.

**Demonstration:** Give out stickers to people who are sitting with their legs crossed.
Ask the question: “Now how come those people got stickers and others didn’t?”
Some children will not understand why they haven’t gotten a sticker.

I know many of you are tied to your stickers. I understand. Handing out stickers or other rewards has been a mainstay in children’s ministry for a long time. What I want to talk about today is how do you have a class without stickers. I’m just asking you to think about the reward system you are using and what you are trying to accomplish.

Is there really life after stickers?

Is it really possible to have a class where kids are in control and function without using a reward system?

Is it really possible for kids to memorize scripture without getting a sticker?

Yes I think so. I think there can be life after stickers. Not only is there life but also there’s

* Enjoyment
* peace of mind
* relationship building
* a general sense that the world and your class is an okay place to be.

Not only can you experience all these perks you can have an inner sense that you are impacting the life of a child in a way that will stay with them into their adult years.

Have you ever thought about the down side to reward systems?

**Demonstration:** Chart answers

* It’s almost always the same kids who don’t get the reward
* If just once sweet little Susie who always does everything right doesn’t get the reward, you will have created a situation where her inner voice will berate her up for a long time.
* It is an external reward not an internal. In other words it doesn’t feel good under the skin and in the heart to get a reward.
* The stickers and prizes have to get bigger and bigger and more expensive as time goes by and the kids get older
* Can everyone be on his or her best behavior all the time? If God gave out stickers, there would certainly be a few days I wouldn’t get a sticker.

Rewards are based on the adult’s judgment of what has happened. There are some kids that will never get a reward. For some kids just the stress of trying to figure this out will send them to the lower level of the brain. Into the survival mode of the brain where they can’t think, rationalize or organize their thoughts enough to get the reward. They will never figure it out.

We should want kids to do things because

* Of the intrinsic value
* It feels good under the skin
* It gives the heart a warm fuzzy feeling
* It feels natural
* It just feels like the right thing to do

Rewards, stickers, trinkets, gum, candy, stars, etc. all serve to create “other control” meaning the child does what YOU want him to do. In other words, things are *conditional on how you the adult are judging them*. Sometimes it might also be on your state of mind that day or your emotional health.

**Demonstration**: I want you to be transparent for a moment. Think of a time you did not give a sticker (or did) because of your state of mind at the moment.

Rewards work for mundane types of task or for short-term memory learning. Things like memorizing a short scripture or perhaps the words to a praise song. They work for the moment – but do the children really understand the “why’s” of what is happening. How long will they remember that scripture?

By the way if a child is experiencing a family crisis or a trauma of some sort, they may not be able to memorize scriptures. It may be a short-term issue due to the stress they are under.

Many times we simply don’t realize how rewards / stickers are coming across to the child.

**Roleplay**

Following is a conversation that my friend, Carnisha, had with her daughter, Brianna, about taking her Bible to church. (Have participant read Bree’s part)

***Carnisha:****How come you want to take your Bible to church?*

***Bree:****So I can get a sticker.*

***Carnisha:****But what’s the reason for taking your Bible?*

***Bree:****To get a sticker!*

***Carnisha:****What I mean is what’s the purpose of taking your Bible?*

***Bree:****I told you, to get a sticker.*

***Carnisha:****Let me put it this way, what do you do with your Bible at church?*

***Bree:****Show it to my teacher so she will give me a sticker.*

***Carnisha:****Why does your teacher want you to bring your Bible?*

***Bree:****So she can give me a sticker.*

***Carnisha:****Do you read out of the Bible or look at it?*

***Bree:****I don’t remember. Once I get the sticker, I lay it down. I don’t remember what else we do with the Bible after I get my sticker.*

Do you think there was any eternal significance for Brianna about taking her Bible to church? Do you think when Brianna is an adult, she will remember taking her Bible to church?

And what are we saying to Brianna about her Bible if we have to bribe her to bring it to church. Does the bribe imply the Bible’s not really important? If it was an important book wouldn’t everyone just want to bring it to church?

**Rewards can create a flawed imagine of God**Do you want children to think God’s love is conditional?

* Because if every time they come to church they are rewarded they quickly learn about conditional love in the very place they should learn about God’s unconditional love.
* In the place where they should be learning about forgiveness
* In the place where they should learn that Jesus died on the cross for their sins.
* In the place where they should be learning about mercy and grace.

Larry Shallenberger in the article, “Stickers & candies & stars – oh my!” (Children’s Ministry Magazine July/August 2007) says when children are learning about God in a bribe-dependent environment, we can expect them to pick up the following false thoughts about God:

* God is emotionally distant. Kids are less likely to learn to build a friendship with God when the focus is on bribes. In adulthood a child groomed on bribes sees God as impersonal dispenser and withholder of rewards rather than counselor and friend.
* A relationship with God is transactional rather than dependent on grace. The message of the Cross is that friendship with God can’t be earned ­– it’s a free gift from God. Bribes contradict that reality.
* Bribes promote a simplistic view of God’s justice and suffering. God gets reduced to a vending machine: *Insert good behavior, receive blessings. Insert poor behavior, receive curses.*
* Bribes don’t prepare kids for the reality that God often doesn’t explain why we suffer. Instead, we condition kids to doubt their standing before God, not to cling to the loving God who stands with them during their darkest hour.

Let’s take a look at using rewards, stickers for behavior issues. When a child has non- compliant behaviors or unruly what is your intent?

**Discipline / Disciple Punishment / Manipulation**1.Intent to teach 1. Intent to feel bad or hurt
2. Consistent 2. Inconsistent
3. Based on love 3. Based on fear
4. Focuses on cooperation 4. Focuses on bribes, intimidation
5. Sets clear expectations 5. Unclear expectations
6. Demonstrates positive behavior 6. Expects child to “just know”
7. Practices positive behavior 7. Expects child to “get it right”
8. Emphasizes solutions 8. Emphasizes blame
9. Helpful to child and adult 9. Hurtful to child and adult
10. Focuses on what to do 10. Focuses on what didn’t do
11. Everybody wins 11. Someone always loses

* Punishment and reward systems for discipline don’t teach the child what happens as a result of their behavior.
* They don’t teach or create self-control in children.
* The child stays focused on what happens when I’m good.
* If I’m good enough I’ll get a sticker. If I’m bad then I don't get a sticker or I lose a sticker or I don’t get to do what the others are doing.

The focuses becomes on what to do to please the adult in the situation.

* When children rely on adult’s judgment day in and day out they come to depend on the judgment of others as a basis for their own moral decisions.
* In other words they don’t learn from their mistakes.
* They only learn to focus on the adult that didn't give them the sticker.
* They grow up trying to figure out what others want from them. “How do I please everyone around me?
* Like I said earlier rewards create other control.

This will be the girl that gets pregnant at fifteen or the boy that gets into drugs simply because they have no moral code of their own. They do what others want them to do because they don’t know how to think for themselves.

When children are allowed to experience the consequence of their choices, which consequences can be good or bad, or they are allowed to make a mistake and be responsible then they can begin to connect the two.

In other words when a child can see the connection between their behavior and the result of that behavior, then learning has occurred.

* Do you want a classroom full of children that only do something to please you the adult?
* Or do you want a group of children that are learning for themselves?
* Do you want a group of children who only come to church to please you?
* Or do you want children to come to church because they truly want to worship and learn more about God and Jesus Christ?

Another way to look at this point is do you want Jacob to ask for the blue crayon because you were looking at him because if you aren’t looking at him and not focused on him he will what \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ grab the crayon, hit the child?

Or do you want Jacob to ask for the blue crayon because he has learned that it feels good inside the body under the skin to be kind and ask the child for the blue crayon?

**Rewards and the brain**

* The brain works best when it feels safe.
* It operates differently when there is a perceived threat. Keep in mind a perceived threat is simply that – the perception the child has.
* When under threat of either not obtaining the reward and or getting punished, the brain reacts with increased blood flow and electrical activity in the brain stem, the survival part of the brain; the freeze, fight or fight part of the brain.
* When the blood flow goes to that brain stem, there is decreased blood flow to the higher thought processing centers.
* When the brain is in the survival mode it becomes less capable of planning, pattern-detection, organizing or learning. It is all about my survival and me.
* The survival brain is reactive and fast. It doesn’t have time to figure out how to act in order to get a reward.
* Some kids literally can’t figure out how to get the reward.

From El Dorado Elementary: <http://acestoohigh.com/2014/01/28/hearts-el-dorado-elementary/>

Counselor Joyce Dorado: The teachers learned what happens to a child’s brain when it’s faced with overwhelming stress. “You can think of the two main parts of the brain that come into play as a horse (“the survival/emotional brain,” AKA the limbic system) and the rider (“the learning/thinking brain”, AKA the prefrontal cortex),” says Dorado. “When something happens that reminds the child of their traumatic experiences, the rider falls off the horse. You’re left with a really terrified horse.

 “No amount of star charts, reasoning with or demanding explanations from or yelling at that terrified horse will make a difference. It will just make the horse more terrified. That’s because you’re not talking to that child’s thinking brain. You’re talking to a terrified horse. The first thing to do is to get the rider back on the horse by helping the child to feel safe and a little bit in control. Only then can you talk about what happened. That can take minutes, hours or days, depending on how stressful the triggering event was, if the child was on edge to begin with, or if the child trusts you.” And, she added, sometimes adult riders get knocked off their horses too, which can make situations worse if they aren’t aware of it. <http://acestoohigh.com/2014/01/28/hearts-el-dorado-elementary/>

From “Conscious Discipline” by Dr. Becky Bailey <https://consciousdiscipline.com> 1.800.842.2846
“Reward systems carry the overt and covert messages of threat.” She says the side effects of reward systems are
1. Loss of optimal brain functioning due to the threat
2. Reduction in long-term quality performance
3. Reduced ability to develop values of caring, respect and friendliness
4. Reduced ability for creative and higher-order thinking skills
5. Reduced self-confidence
6. Reduction in inner drive and intrinsic motivation

**I reward my dog when she does a trick**

Rewards work on animals. When I want to teach my dog something knew I reward her when she does what I ask. We recently taught her to sit pretty. When she does it the way she is supposed to she gets a treat. Eventually she will do the trick or obey the command and won’t need a reward. I control the dog by the treats.

Bribes and rewards work on animals – not on kids. Studies have shown that when you reward kids for doing something, the more they lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. In other words kids may enjoy something because of what they are doing and accomplishing on their own. When you begin to offer rewards it takes away the internal intrinsic value and the child becomes less interested.

Do you want to control the child, train the child to do your tricks or do you want to encourage the child to have self-control? Controlling children can be very daunting and exhausting.

**Celebrations**

Instead of bribing with rewards think about doing celebrations instead. A reward is essentially a bribe, “If you bring your Bible every week, you’ll get a sticker.” The child brings their Bible in order to get the sticker.

A celebration is something that marks the occasion. A celebration is done to celebrate an accomplishment. Instead of telling the child he or she will get a sticker why not some Sunday morning celebrate the fact that half the class brought their Bibles today. Everyone gets to celebrate the kids that brought their Bibles.

Celebrations are fun. They are festive, a party of sorts and a way to praise what has been achieved. It shouldn’t be announced before hand. It just is.

Let’s go back to Breeanna and her Bible. What if Breeanna did bring her Bible and instead of getting a bribe the teacher whooped and praised and said, “Okay then, let’s celebrate. Three kids brought their Bibles today. Who wants to be the first to read today’s verse out of their very own Bible?”

If you feel you will need to detox from giving out stickers, candies and stars, then hand them out to everyone in class.

There are so many things to celebrate

* Celebrate the birth of Christ
* Celebrate Easter the risen Savior
* Celebrate spring new life
* Celebrate fall and the changing of colors in nature
* Celebrate new friends that have come to class
* Celebrate when someone brings a new friend to class
* Celebrate answered prayers

Celebrations can bring joy and happiness to the group, not intimidation to some children because they can’t be good enough!