

Motivation, Punishment and Reward

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Motivation: There will be many times in your child's life when you want them to do something they don't want to do. It may be something you know will be valuable in the long run, but they're not interested now. Potty training may be the first place you explore this, so we'll use it as our example, but it applies to many things.

First, **consider your motivations.** Why do you want your child to learn this new skill? Some examples:

- Outside demands: Is it pressure from a pre-school or daycare that requires it by a certain age?
- Peer pressure: Is it because other families are doing it, or the media says you should be?
- What you want to change: Are you just tired of dealing with diapers?
- What you want for your child: You want to encourage your child toward independence?

The clearer your motivation, and the stronger your motivation, the more time and energy you're likely to be willing to commit to the process. If you're not motivated now, can it wait?

Then ask yourself: **What are your child's motivations?** Try to view things from your child's perspective and understand why they might not be as interested in learning a new skill as you are in teaching it.

Then ask: **What might motivate your child?** Some options are punishment or rewards...

Punishment? It's best not to use punishment. Punishment can definitely work in the short term. A child who is punished for doing something (e.g. eliminating in a diaper) may try hard to avoid that punishment in the future (e.g. by using the potty). But it could also shame them. And it can mean that they're doing something *only* to avoid punishment – not for any positive reason. On the other hand, logical consequences *are* appropriate, as long as they are done without shaming. For example, asking them to help clean up "accidents."

Rewards? Many people use a sticker chart, or other reward system. This is most likely to succeed if you follow these guidelines: Talk with your child about this, make sure they're clear about exactly what they're working on. Tell them if they do it, they will get a reward. Involve them in picking out the reward and creating the chart. For rewards, it's best to choose something cheap and easy to obtain, like a sticker.

Have a plan for making it harder to earn the reward over time. For example: "if you sit on the potty, you get a sticker whether or not you pee there" may be a good first level. Later, they need to actually pee or poop to get the sticker. Once they've mastered that, set a cumulative goal like "once you've pooped in the potty 10 times, you will have filled the chart, then you get a new toy." Over time you will phase out rewards for using the potty.

I prefer social rewards where you celebrate together: "When you _____, then we get to _____."

Rewards can be a very effective tool for kids. However, don't over-use rewards! And make sure the focus is on accomplishing the goal for its own sake, not on just doing something so they get a reward.

Praise? Experts recommend that when you want your child to learn a new skill, think about what you are really trying to teach and stay focused on that. Work with your child to find *their* motivation for learning this new skill. As they make attempts along the way, give specific praise for their efforts and their commitment, and specific recommendations for how they might improve. The emphasis is more on the process than the product, more on the work they do than on the "talent" they have. When they accomplish a goal that they set, then it is totally appropriate to celebrate that with something (Stickers? M&M's? A special toy?) as long as the emphasis is on the value of the accomplishment itself, not on having done whatever they needed to do just to earn the reward.

For more on Internal Motivation, Rewards and Praise: go to www.GoodDaysWithKids.com