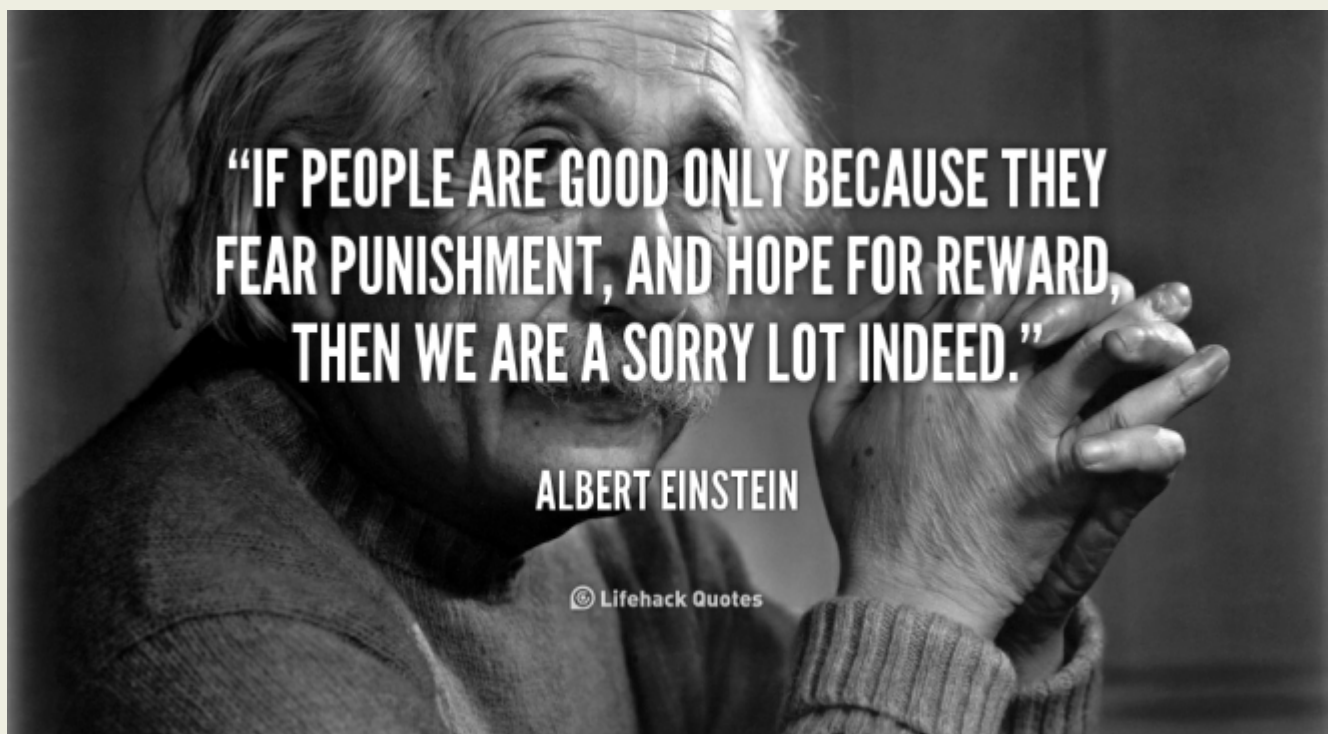


Intrinsic Motivation vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Let's talk about motivation today. We are motivated to do things for all sorts of reasons, some of which have intrinsic value, and others that are more extrinsically driven. An example of an intrinsically motivated choice would be reading a book purely because you value learning or reading a story. You get no external benefit from reading the book, it is all intrinsic in nature. The pleasure is driven solely by the activity you are doing. In contrast, an example of an extrinsically motivated choice would doing something good for a reward, or even avoiding something to avoid a punishment. With extrinsically motivated choices the action isn't seen as beneficial to you unless there is a reward or you are avoiding a punishment. The pleasure comes more from the reward or lack of punishment than from the task itself. There isn't anything wrong with being externally motivated for some things. How many of us go to work simply to get a paycheck? The problem is how much we use extrinsic motivation on children in regards to their behavior and their life choices.



Extrinsic Motivation And Why It Isn't So Great

So...what does all this have to do with parenting? Most traditional parenting methods are heavily focused on changing behaviors with extrinsic motivation. Whether it be punishments or rewards, the goal is the same. There has been a lot of research on how punishments and negative motivation can be harmful.

Many educators are acutely aware that punishment and threats are

counterproductive. Making children suffer in order to alter their future behavior can often elicit temporary compliance, but this strategy is unlikely to help children become ethical, compassionate decision makers. Punishment, even if referred to euphemistically as “consequences,” tends to generate anger, defiance, and a desire for revenge. Moreover, it models the use of power rather than reason and ruptures the important relationship between adult and child. ~Alfie Kohn

Now the focus is more on positive motivators. Parents are using sticker charts, praise, and rewards for good behaviors as their main focus. I am not here to argue whether rewards or any kind of extrinsic motivation works. We know that it does. I am here to argue that children who are purely extrinsically motivated have a harder time being intrinsically motivated. Basically, they won't want to perform a task unless there is some external benefit. Extrinsic motivation doesn't last. It has to constantly be repeated every time you want them to do something. Kids aren't learning the internal benefits of reading, pitching in around the house, learning, etc because once extrinsic motivation is introduced, the intrinsic motivation has very little chance to develop on its own.

Rewards cause people to lose interest in whatever they were rewarded for doing. ~Alfie Kohn

Intrinsic motivation

Maybe this isn't a problem for you. Maybe you are perfectly willing to reward your child for good behavior until they move out, but for the rest of us, we want our children to want to be kind, to want to share, to want to help out around the house, to want to learn. We want them to do all these things without the promise of a reward or the threat of a punishment. We want them to have an intrinsic desire for these things because we know they won't be living with us forever, and we want them to have a life time of happiness that doesn't revolve around being rewarded or punished for doing things.

To be intrinsically motivated is to see the value in something without external factors swaying your decision. It is wanting to help because you care about the person you are helping. It is practicing an instrument because you want to get better and you love playing. It is sharing with a friend or sibling because you care about them and want to include them. I am fairly certain that if parents are being honest with themselves they would much prefer

a child that is intrinsically motivated to do well and be kind. The problem is our parenting practices and fears that our children won't naturally behave the way we want them to tends to sway our decision-making process.



Intrinsic Motivation and Living Authentically

The golden question then is, how do we intrinsically motivate children? Well, you can't, because the very definition of intrinsic means it has to come from them. **They** have to want it. There is no way to control your children to be intrinsically motivated. The answer is to allow your children the freedom to decide. Educate them about healthy food choices, and then let them decide. Talk to them about helping out around the house and then let them decide. Talk to them about all sorts of things, and then let them decide. And most importantly, model an intrinsically motivated life so that they can see how rewarding living a principled life is. No rewards are needed for doing something you absolutely love doing. You will do it whether there is a reward or not.

In short, good values have to be grown from the inside out. Attempts to short-circuit this process by dangling rewards in front of children are at best ineffective, and at worst counterproductive. Children are likely to become enthusiastic, lifelong learners as a result of being provided with an engaging curriculum; a safe, caring community in which to discover and create; and a significant degree of choice about what (and how and why) they are learning. Rewards-like punishments-are unnecessary when these things are present, and are

ultimately destructive in any case. ~Alfie Kohn

So what does this mean as far as parenting our children goes? Hopefully, we all already understand that punishments are ineffectual for long term compliance and behavior, but what about rewards? This doesn't have to mean we never do anything fun for our children, but it means there is no stipulation for doing something nice for them. You will take them to a movie simply because you want to take them out and have a good time. You will hug them simply because you love them. You will buy them ice cream simply because you want to do something special for them. Letting go of manipulating behaviors with extrinsic motivators opens up the gate for you to live authentically with your children. They do something you don't like and you talk to them about it, just like you would with any adult who did something you didn't like. They do something you do like you give them a high five, or tell them you are grateful. They do something that they like, no reward needed because the benefit was already achieved in the act itself.

The fundamental problem with parenting to today is the attempt to control and manipulate our children's behavior through extrinsic means. This is an old outdated idea and our children are ready for change. Our **real** power with our kids comes through our connection with them. That is where intrinsic motivation really has the chance to grow.

The topic of intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation is a large one that covers anything from parenting, education, and the workplace that whole books have been written about. If this idea intrigues you and you want more, I highly recommend looking into Alfie Kohn for more information on parenting and education and Dan Pink has a great Ted Talk that discusses motivation more in life and in the workplace just to name a few.