

Rewards, Punishments, or Threats?

Dr. Roger McIntire

We all know what bad behavior is, but it's harder to pin down our expectations of good behavior. Bad language, for example, is much easier to spot in a family moment than a good attitude toward a brother or "playing nice."

So we may encourage good behavior now and then, "Get that homework done and we'll have popcorn with TV after supper!" But bad behavior usually gets most of the attention, "You hit your sister again so you won't get any dessert."

We all understand the popcorn reward as positive reinforcement, and the no-dessert punishment strategy. But our most common strategy is to use a mild threat, not just to intimidate bad behavior but also to motivate the good: "Clean up those dishes or there will be no TV tonight!" Now Mom's son may get busy on the dishes to avoid losing the TV, or he may hope to avoid the dishes and the threat because he thinks Mom is bluffing.

This starts a destructive, competitive game: if he does the dishes, Mom wins. If he procrastinates and she's bluffing, he wins. If he procrastinates and Mom carries through with her threat, everybody loses. It's called negative reinforcement because it uses Mom's negative threats to motivate (reinforce) her children to do what she thinks they should. Since most of us are not very good at coming up with new threats or carrying through on the old ones, the situation seems to call for a lot of talking, nagging, and bluffing.

A child can use negative reinforcement, too. Parent requests are often met with a lot of flack or even threats. If the resistance succeeds, the child avoids the request and the parent avoids more obnoxious behavior. Not a satisfactory outcome but one that is likely to be repeated when it works.

The child's threats and lack of compliance make up his version of "flack" and some parents would rather give in (make the bed or take out the trash themselves) than "take all that flack." There's no payoff for Mom, just the avoidance of more resistance and flack.

A game of flack can go on a long time because it attracts attention and is a little entertaining. Now if it also works in getting out of requests, we are well on the way to building ourselves a real problem.

If your own life is surrounded by such negatives, you would probably explain most of what you do by saying, "Well if I didn't make his lunch (drive him to school, wake him up three times in the morning), there would be a price to pay." People who feel they are always avoiding the "price to pay" tend to remain in an unhappy rut.

If there is a mild form of terrorism this is probably it. Victims of negative reinforcement may never change because they have learned to take no risks. If you have this kind of situation in your family or marriage, it's time to talk about a change. Otherwise victims in the game are likely to get leaving on their mind.

"If I don't do what she wants, would she really throw a fit as she sometimes has? Or is that time past?" Could I just tell my husband, "I really don't want to go shopping again this weekend" and get away with it? Would my wife really blow up if I said, "Let's just take in a movie instead of going over to the Smith's?" Or is it just a bluff I have remembered too long?

Negative reinforcement looks for mistakes where "getting mad" or other threats can be carried out. To change this strategy, a parent or spouse needs to balance it with specific compliments and appreciation. Highlighting the good and the successes has a more durable effect and presents a better model to be imitated. In the long run, it makes for a happier family atmosphere.

Dr. McIntire is the author of *Teenagers and Parents: 10 Steps to a Better Relationship and Raising Good Kids in Tough Times*.

Dr. Roger McIntire taught child psychology and family counseling at the University of Maryland for 32 years, where he conducted research and did applied work with parents and teachers. He has published several books, for both professionals and parents, appears often on radio and television talk shows, and writes a weekly column, *Raising Good Kids in Tough Times*, for the Martinsburg (WV) Journal. He received the 2001 Award for Effective Presentation of Behavior Analysis in the Mass Media, from the Association for Behavior Analysis. He is a father and grandfather. You can find out more about his publications at parentsuccess.com.