SOFTWARE & TECH

Alfie Kohn Punished By Rewards

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Rethinking Motivation: Why Alfie Kohn's "Punished By Rewards" Still Matters

Walk into any classroom, office, or living room, and you will witness a deeply ingrained habit: the use of rewards. Stickers for good behavior, bonuses for hitting targets, and treats for chores are so common that they seem like common sense. We assume that dangling a carrot in front of people is the best way to get them to do what we want. But what if this assumption is fundamentally wrong? What if the very system we rely on to motivate actually undermines the behavior it seeks to create?

This is the provocative and deeply researched claim at the heart of **Alfie Kohn's Punished By Rewards**. First published in 1993 and updated in 1999 and 2018, this book remains one of the most challenging and important works on human motivation. Kohn's central argument is not just that rewards are ineffective over the long term, but that they are actively destructive. He argues that "do this and you'll get that" is not a tool of motivation; it is a tool of control, and like all forms of control, it backfires. This article explores Kohn's core thesis, the research that supports it, and what we can do instead to foster lasting engagement, creativity, and a genuine love for learning and work.

Who is Alfie Kohn?

Alfie Kohn is an independent scholar and author who has spent decades challenging conventional wisdom in education, parenting, and business management. He has written fourteen books on topics ranging from competition to homework to unconditional parenting. Kohn is known for his evidence-based, often contrarian positions. He does not simply offer tips and tricks; he asks us to question the fundamental assumptions of our culture, particularly the "pop behaviorism" that dominates how we raise children, teach students, and manage employees.

Alfie Kohn Punished By Rewardssits at the center of his life's work. The book systematically dismantles the theory and practice of behavior modification, drawing on hundreds of studies in psychology, sociology, and education. Kohn writes with a direct, sometimes sharp, style, but his arguments are grounded in decades of peer-reviewed research. Understanding his work means understanding a coherent, alternative vision of human nature, one that prioritizes intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and community over compliance and control.

The Central Thesis of Punished by Rewards

At its simplest, Kohn's argument is that rewards and punishments are two sides of the same coin. Both are ways of controlling behavior. While punishments tell someone, "Do this or something bad will happen to you," rewards communicate, "Do this and you will get something good." In either case, the person being controlled is not being respected as a thinking, feeling individual. They are being manipulated.

Kohn identifies three fundamental flaws in the use of rewards:

- Rewards punish. This is the most counterintuitive point. When an employee fails to earn a bonus, or a child does not receive a sticker, the absence of the reward feels like a punishment. Furthermore, the very act of offering a reward can be experienced as controlling and pressuring, which is inherently unpleasant.
- Rewards rupture relationships. When people compete for a limited number of rewards (e.g., “Employee of the Month”), they are pitted against one another. This destroys collaboration and trust. Even in one-on-one situations, the reward-giver is positioned as a judge and the receiver as a subordinate, harming the relationship.
- Rewards ignore the reasons behind behavior. A reward system is a one-size-fits-all solution. It never asks *why* a child is misbehaving or *why* an employee is disengaged. It simply tries to bribe them into acting differently. It addresses symptoms, not root causes. As Kohn famously writes, “Good values have to be grown from the inside out.” Rewards attempt to impose them from the outside in.

The Extrinsic Motivation Trap

The most damaging effect of rewards is what psychologists call the “overjustification effect.” A wealth of research, much of it cited in **Alfie Kohn Punished By Rewards**, shows that when people are given a reward for doing something they initially found intrinsically interesting, their intrinsic interest declines. The activity becomes something they do for the reward, not for its own sake.

Think of a child who loves to draw. If an adult starts offering a dollar for every picture the child completes, the child’s motivation shifts. The drawing becomes a means to an end. If the reward is later removed, the child is likely to draw less than they did before the reward was introduced. The reward has “killed” the intrinsic motivation. In the workplace, this translates to employees who only do the minimum required to get their bonus, losing creativity and initiative.

Why Rewards Fail: The Research Behind the Claims

Kohn does not just present a philosophical argument; he backs it up with a mountain of evidence. The book summarizes hundreds of studies from the fields of social psychology, education, and organizational behavior. The cumulative finding is clear: rewards typically fail to produce lasting change, and often make things worse.

Key research areas include:

- Creativity: Studies consistently show that when people are told they will be rewarded for a task, their work becomes less creative. They focus on the quickest path to the reward, taking fewer risks and generating fewer original ideas.
- Long-Term Motivation: When rewards stop, the desired behavior usually stops. This is because the behavior was never internalized. The person did it “to get something,” not because they valued it.
- Risk-Taking: Rewards encourage people to choose the easiest possible task. Why try something challenging if you might fail and lose the reward? This is a disaster for any organization or classroom that needs innovation.

The Hidden Cost of Praise

Kohn also takes aim at a particularly cherished form of reward: praise. He argues that even verbal praise like “Good job!” or “You’re so smart!” can be controlling. It positions the praise-giver as the judge of what is valuable. It can also create praise junkies, children or employees who become dependent on external approval. Instead of focusing on their own satisfaction with their work, they constantly look to others for validation. This doesn't mean we should never express appreciation. Kohn distinguishes between controlling, evaluative praise (“Good job! That’s exactly what I wanted!”) and genuine, non-evaluative feedback (“Look at how you solved that problem! Tell me how you did it.”).

Beyond Rewards: What Kohn Proposes Instead

is that it is purely negative: “Okay, so what *do* we do?” Kohn is ready with an answer, though it requires more effort than simply handing out a sticker. He calls for a shift from a “doing to” model of motivation to a “working with” model.

Kohn’s alternative framework is built on the “Three C’s”:

Collaboration

People need to feel connected. They need to work together, not compete against each other. In a classroom, this means cooperative learning instead of grades on a curve. In the workplace, it means team-based projects and evaluation, not zero-sum bonus pools. When people feel they belong to a community, they are far more motivated to contribute to its success.

Content

The task itself must be meaningful. This is the most powerful motivator of all. If the work is boring, repetitive, and pointless, no amount of rewards will make it engaging in the long run. Instead of trying to “motivate” people to do meaningless work, we should focus on making the work more meaningful. In education, this means creating curricula that are relevant, interesting, and connected to students’ lives. In the workplace, it means giving employees autonomy and purpose.

Choice

Autonomy is a core psychological need. When people feel they have a say in what they do and how they do it, their engagement skyrockets. Rewards are the opposite of choice; they tell someone exactly what to do and dictate the outcome. Kohn advocates for giving students and employees genuine opportunities to make decisions. This does not mean chaos. It means creating a structure where people can exercise their judgment and take ownership of their work.

Implications: Transforming Education, Work, and Parenting

In Education

Alfie Kohn Punished By Rewards has had a profound impact on progressive education. Kohn’s work is a direct challenge to “token economies” in classrooms, reading incentive programs (like “Book It!”), and even grades. He argues that grades are the ultimate reward-punishment system, reducing complex learning to a letter or number. Instead, he advocates for narrative feedback, portfolio assessments, and student-led conferences. He also challenges homework, arguing that if work is meaningful and engaging, it will be done in the classroom, and more of the same at home does not improve outcomes.

In the Workplace

The business world is slowly catching up to Kohn’s ideas. The rise of “self-determination theory” and “holacracy” echoes many of his conclusions. Companies like Buffer, Patagonia, and Valve have experimented with removing performance ratings and bonuses, focusing instead on transparency, purpose, and autonomy. Kohn argues that pay should be fair, adequate, and decoupled from specific performance metrics. When people are paid well and then given autonomy to do meaningful work with their colleagues, they naturally do their best. Pay-for-performance, by contrast, encourages gaming the system, cheating, and a focus on short-term results.

In Parenting

Perhaps the most challenging application is in parenting. Kohn urges parents to reject both punishment and rewards. Instead of using a “star chart” to get a child to clean their room, a parent should explain the importance of contributing to the family, work with the child to find a system that works for them, and offer help if the child is struggling. Instead of bribing a child for being kind, a parent should model kindness and point out the intrinsic rewards of helping others. This approach, which Kohn calls “working with” the child, is harder and more time-consuming, but it builds a child’s internal moral compass rather than a dependence on external

control.

Common Criticisms of Kohn’s Ideas

Kohn’s work is not without its critics. Some argue that his claims are too absolute. They ask: “Don’t rewards work in the short term?” Kohn would agree they do, for simple, repetitive tasks. But he would argue that they come with long-term costs. Others suggest that some people, particularly in low-wage jobs, are not motivated by purpose but by survival. Kohn’s response is that this is an argument for paying people a living wage, not an argument for using rewards as a management tool. If a job is so terrible that people only do it for the money, the solution is to change the job, not to add more control.

A more substantive critique is that Kohn underestimates the role of structure and accountability, especially in schools

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