

How 'bribery' can trick your child into good behaviour

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'Bribery tools' are exactly that, but are one way of eking out good behaviour from the little ones, writes Gwen Loughman

Last year I called a family meeting to iron out some common grievances that are too numerous to go into here. Everyone was invited to contribute towards a democratic solution for maintaining familial harmony going forward.

After a fashion, we agreed to be more mindful of individual needs, knock on closed doors before barging ahead, and, in general, to try harder. Everyone got a chance to speak and, delighted with ourselves, we adjourned.

However, the failure to lay down proper expectations for an end result contributed in no small part to the ensuing massive downfall. Within weeks, similar to an unsupervised classroom, things quickly returned to their chaotic status. The rows over Xbox continued, noise levels rose, and all promises to knock before entering were completely forgotten.

The parents held a secret meeting of our own and we reconvened to outline a new and improved definite plan of action; a reward system.

We tweaked a ticket system the boys were already using in school but instead of ticéad glas (green tickets), at home they could earn Golden Tickets for completing certain daily household chores plus keeping toys and personal belongings tidy. The Golden Tickets were to be looked upon as a form of currency and when 80 were banked, the reward would be a day trip to Tayto Park.

But when you are aged 11 and under, amassing 80 tickets can seem like a gargantuan ask, not to mention strongly resembling a small carrot at the end of a very long stick.

We realised we needed a way of fostering incentive to keep the end game in sight, so the boys were given the option to "spend" their savings on the swimming pool, cinema, or a family meal out when they earned 30, 40, or 50 tickets, respectively.

So far so brilliant.

Except, the weeks after, I found, instead of recognising good behaviour and issuing bonus tickets, I was using the system as a stick to beat them with by removing their fairly and squarely earned Golden Tickets.

Naturally this created a lot of dissension in the ranks and I was quickly called to task.

It seemed I still had a lot to learn.

Olivia Willis co-founder of familyfriendlyhq.ie, has found parents are divided on reward systems. "They either love them or loathe them. Some parents rely heavily on them, others have crashed and burned (their words)."

Bribery tools are exactly that regardless of whether it is stickers, money, sweets, or day trips that are used as currency. But do they work? Are they sustainable and are they fair? Willis says: "Let's say a parent offers a special treat or money for making their bed daily and notices that it has not been done for several days. When the parent confronts the child, and explains they won't receive the reward, the response is, 'That's

OK, I have all the money I need now' or 'I don't want any iPad time today'. Then what? There is a theory that the more you reward people for doing something, the less interest they come to have in whatever they had to do to get the reward."

This is precisely what Christine, a mum of two, says happened with her daughter. "She figured out how to work the system to her advantage very early and would comply for exactly as long as it took and/or reward herself extra points and then ta-da, she had won."

For every positive reward system, there are two more saying they don't work. It's not a one-size-fits-all but most have common traits. The aim is to help prevent power struggles and reduce parents' need to nag, making every day routines easier.

Willis says with the right incentives and structure, they can be an effective way to get kids in the habit of brushing their teeth, for example, or tidying up their toys.

This worked for Naomi who found giving her children small, achievable tasks maintained the focus and gave them ownership of what they did and earned. "We used beads in a jar. The kids each had a jar and beads of their chosen colour. We agreed which tasks were awarded a bead and when they had six beads, it earned them half an hour of screen time. I also stopped telling them to put their shoes on 100 times."

Niamh O'Reilly sleep specialist for babies and toddlers at thenursery.ie, feels it's age-dependant, with instant gratification working well for children under the age of four. "Often all they will hear is zoo, swimming, etc, and parents are plagued. From age two-and-a-half onwards, for children who have good language and comprehension skills, with sleep work, I use a system that doesn't mean waiting X amount of days for a reward."

Rather than the normal reward charts, O'Reilly suggests using a clear plastic bag filled with your child's current favourite toys. "Hang the bag where it is visible to them during the day. Explain that if they stay in their own bed, or go to bed with no messing, they get to choose something from the prize bag. This can be good as little ones will see the bag during the day and it acts as a gentle reminder and incentive."

Elizabeth uses good old-fashioned cash incentive with her four children, aged 10 down to 5. "All chores have an allocation of ticks. Each tick is worth 50c. So tidying the playroom is worth three but bringing in timber is just one tick. It's working great as they have to complete their daily chores before they can do any bonus ones."

Willis concedes that parenting is the toughest job in the world but feels that encouraging good behaviour with praise rather than pointing out the bad has better results. "Praise is when you tell your child what you like about their behaviour. It goes a long way towards helping your child feel good about themselves. It makes them happy, confident, and, I think, more encouraged to repeat the same level of good behaviour. Most behaviour is influenced by the consequences that follow it, so when you reward your child's behaviour the theory is that the behaviour is more likely to happen again in the future."

What worked best for us as a family was having an end goal in sight, helped by outlining clear expectations. We held regular family meetings where everyone had a say. This meant the boys felt their opinion mattered and any suggestions put forward were taken on board.

Willis advises: "Use praise as a tool to help change difficult behaviour. Watch for when your child behaves in a way that you are happy with. When you see the positive behaviour tell them what you liked about it. Praise effort as well as achievement: 'It's great how you said please and thank you when you asked for that.' Look for ways to reward the desirable behaviour outside of a reward chart; for example, give your child a high five or an extra special cuddle."