Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care: An international journal of group and family care experience

Volume 23.2

Received: 13/08/2024

Accepted: 02/09/2024

Keywords:
Rewards, incentives, behaviour, motivation, residential child care

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.0090995

Short Article

Against the use of rewards in residential child care

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Abstract:

Rewards given to children and young people for meeting behavioural targets appear to be pervasive across children's homes, although there is little research on their effectiveness and their possible limitations. In this short article, arguments against the use of rewards in residential child care will be explored, including those related to children's cause and effect thinking, power imbalances between staff and young people, the communication underneath the behaviour, and the undermining of a young person's intrinsic motivation. The possibility of residential child care without rewards and reward systems will be discussed.

Introduction

A reward is defined as 'something that is given in return for good or evil done or received or that is offered or given for some service or attainment', or 'a stimulus (such as food) that is administered to an organism and serves to reinforce a desired response' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Rewards, or incentives (I will use the terms interchangeably throughout this piece) are frequently used in residential care with children and young people (Lombard, 2011). Such incentives are often monetary, for example giving young people their weekly pocket money, the amount of which is based on how the young person has behaved throughout the week. Targets are set based on what the young person is perceived by staff to need to work on and can range from having a bath every day, to not making racist remarks toward staff, not going missing, or settling in bed by a certain time each night. Young people often do not get any choice in the target for their incentive.

This article will discuss why rewards and reward systems ultimately fail, including arguments around the punitiveness inherent in rewards, traumatised young people's lack of cause and effect thinking, how extrinsic motivation (external motivation such as from incentives) undermines intrinsic motivation (that which comes from within), ruptures and relationships, and behaviour as communication. Lastly, I will briefly discuss how children's residential care can move past rewards toward more connection-focussed practice underlined by unconditional care and positive regard. The work of Alfie Kohn, author and

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lecturer, will be drawn upon to demonstrate that rewards do not work and in fact may cause harm to vulnerable young people and their relationships with residential child care practitioners.

Rewards ignore reasons

Incentives ignore underlying reasons for behaviour (Kohn, 1993). There can be a temptation to ignore the reasons for a young person not bathing or speaking rudely to staff, and to choose to incentivise a young person to behave differently instead of enacting this important exploratory work. For example, a chaotic, 'messy' bedroom may reflect the chaos of the young person's mind or may feel homely due to growing up in an untidy, unclean space (Cairns & Cairns, 2016). Going missing or not settling in bed at night could be the result of unmet social or emotional needs or blocked trust. Such themes need to be explored, as well as whether the child or young person has conscious control over the behaviour, before rewards are considered.

As Karen Treisman (2016) puts it, behaviour is communication, and what is being communicated may be an unmet need. It is up to residential child care practitioners to make sense of children's behaviour and explore it with them. Similarly, parenting specialist Dr Becky Kennedy (2022) argues that rewards focus on the question of, 'how do we change behaviour?' but when caregivers focus on what is under the surface they have the chance to build resilience in the child and help them to regulate their emotions, both of which will lead to more effective behaviour change. Behaviour is a window into children's feelings (Kennedy, 2022) and 'a stream of messaging about their emotions and their past' (Cairns & Cairns, 2016, p.217). We must respect this, instead of immediately considering ways to expel or extinguish problematic behaviour.

A young person's behaviours of concern may be their way of showing adults what they have been through. In this case, 'translating' the behaviour can be transformational for the child or young person, as they are helped to feel understood and valued. Regan (2019) argues that the first skill needed by adults taking care of children is to reflect on their own emotions which are stirred up by the young person's behaviour. This is particularly vital when thinking about rewards because the emotions that staff feel as a result of the young person's behaviour can cause teams to bypass understanding and jump straight into rewarding or punishing the behaviour, which, according to Regan's argument, is not a helpful thing to do.

Kohn (1993) argues that even if we are sure nothing complex is going on underneath the behaviour, and the behaviour is under the conscious control of the young person, it is still necessary to try to address the cause as opposed to simply trying to change the behaviour. He goes on to state that even when adults think there is nothing beneath the behaviour, there usually is.

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Rewards punish

Rewards and punishments are two sides of the same coin, they both stem from the view that motivation is nothing more than the manipulation of behaviour (Kohn, 1993). Intuitively, child care practitioners know that rewards are just as controlling as punishments; they just control by seduction. As Kohn (1993) states, rewards punish. If one does not get the reward or incentive, one is being punished. The feeling of disappointment upon not getting the reward is an aversive consequence. It may seem more palatable to reward children instead of punishing them, but both are predicated on children losing out when they are struggling or in crisis.

Pain-based behaviours

The behaviours that residential child care workers target with rewards are often pain-based behaviours, such as verbal aggression, defiance or going missing. Many of the young people in residential care have complex or relational trauma, terms that describe a spectrum of conditions that usually arise out of repeated or cumulative traumas (Milot et al., 2015). Such early trauma accelerates the development of the brain's threat system and causes a child or young person to go into fight, flight or freeze responses more easily (McCrory, 2020), causing children and young people to be hyper-aroused and hypervigilant. Understanding behaviours as pain-based helps practitioners to see the behaviour as the problem, rather than the child, and to respond in more compassionate ways. It also helps residential child care workers to become more aware of the fact that these behaviours may not be under the conscious control of the young person.

Cause and effect thinking

Young people with early trauma often lack cause and effect thinking until they are taught it through therapeutic (re-)parenting and natural or logical consequences (Cairns & Cairns, 2016; Naish, 2018). This means they struggle to see how their actions impact others and the world around them. Any attempt to offer them rewards for doing something (or not doing something) is likely to confuse them and be ineffective until this important mental capacity is established, possibly well into their teens (Naish, 2018). This is where interventions such as the life space interview, where the young person is helped to understand how a trigger caused an emotion which provoked an emotional response from them (Holden et al., 2020), can be more helpful than behaviourist techniques (such as rewards) which do not support the young person to understand their behaviours.

Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is the internal sense of motivation that we must, or want to, do something, whereas extrinsic motivation is motivation that comes from outside of ourselves, for example rewards. In a meta-analysis of 128 studies, Deci et al. (1999) found that engagement-contingent, completion-contingent,

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and performance-contingent rewards undermined intrinsic motivation, with this effect being more prominent in children than it was in college students. Fabes et al. (1989) found that even when rewards are used in an attempt to promote positive qualities in children such as altruism, the rewards undermine the children's intrinsic motivation to behave altruistically. In this study, children's intrinsic motivation to help others was negatively affected by receiving rewards for helping. Children rewarded for helping others did this less following the period of being rewarded for the behaviour.

These studies show the need to exercise caution when rewarding children and young people for engaging in desirable behaviours, as they may turn out to be less willing or likely to complete the behaviour following the removal of rewards (Kohn, 1993). Children don't need to be rewarded to learn, they are already intrinsically motivated to do so (Kohn, 1993), and if they are not, this is likely a result of them not feeling safe enough to learn due to their traumatic history.

Incentives do not teach personal responsibility

Incentives do not empower young people to take control of their own lives. The argument goes that incentivising them to carry out tasks independently is preparing them for the 'real world'. However, given that extrinsic motivation undermines intrinsic motivation, to argue that rewards prepare them for being an adult in society is unconvincing. Is it *really* preparing them for adulthood to withhold their pocket money if they fail to achieve their targets? It would be preparing them for adulthood to collaborate with them on the goals they need to work on and to build connection, a sense of autonomy, and an intrinsic motivation to make change in their lives. The motivation must come from within them.

Rewards rupture relationships

Alfie Kohn (1993) argues that rewards are not conducive to developing positive relationships that provide optimal conditions for growth and learning, which are exactly the kind of relationships residential child care practitioners aim to develop with young people. Rewards and incentives highlight the power imbalance between staff and young people, since the practitioners are deciding who gets them, when, and why. Power is an important aspect of trauma, such that underlining the power dynamics in interactions with young people could be harmful to the relationship or even retraumatising.

The lack of choice may make young people feel powerless and disempowered, at the mercy of staff who can decide what their incentive is for the week without even having a discussion with them about it. This can replicate some of the traumatic events the young person may have experienced and be triggering for them or make them feel unsafe in the home.

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Children need to feel understood

Rewards can lead to young people feeling misunderstood. According to Regan (2019), it is possible to get too caught up in the concrete and fail to see the symbolism behind a young person's behaviour. This can lead to a young person being rewarded instead of being understood on a deeper level, which could induce shame. Practitioner-young person relationships will be improved if young people feel understood, thereby allowing them to begin to trust the adults around them, leading to further gains.

Rewards could facilitate staff mentalisation failure, due to a focus on the outward behaviour rather than the internal world of young people. According to Oestergaard Hagelquist (2023), mentalisation is the ability to see behind a behaviour to the mental states, including emotions, desires, feelings, thoughts and needs, that lie beneath. Young people need to experience mentalisation from their caregivers before they can develop the capacity to mentalise themselves. Children's homes should be *environments* of mentalisation, offering young people the chance to learn and practice this important skill through modelling. Residential child care settings should aspire to mentalise in the face of non-mentalising behaviour (Oestergaard Hagelquist, 2023). Just as mentalisation begets mentalisation, non-mentalisation begets non-mentalisation, and young people are also at risk of mentalisation failure where staff are not using mentalisation themselves, for example to interpret and translate a young person's behaviour in the context of their situation and life experiences.

Residential care without rewards

This article has shown the many difficulties with incentives and reward systems in residential child care, from issues of motivation and cause and effect thinking to failing to look at the communication and potential unmet needs behind the behaviour.

According to Kohn (1993), we have become accustomed to thinking that doing something about a problem requires doing something *to* children. This is a harmful mindset for which looked after children especially pay the price. Behaviourist strategies like rewards set the stage for fear and compliance to pull the strings, sidelining connection and autonomy. Empowering young people to make change in their lives is about more than just incentivising them to behave differently, it is about cultivating a positive mindset so that with grit and determination they can succeed despite the difficulties they face.

Children and young people should be fully involved in creating their targets and identifying what they need to work on to meet their goals. Although young people and practitioners are unlikely to entirely agree with one another, this co-production builds trust. It is intuitive that trusting relationships are more likely to result in meaningful, lasting change than reward systems that damage

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intrinsic motivation and underline the power imbalance between practitioners and young people.

It is the role of the practitioner to maintain a mentalising stance and decode the meaning behind the behaviour, thereby recognising the need behind it. To support the child or young person to cope differently and become more resilient, we must ensure their needs are being fully met and not assume that a young person has conscious control over the behaviour. We must relate a child's behaviour back to its context and prioritise helping the child to feel safe within the home environment, as promoting safety will decrease problematic behaviours. Residential child care practitioners must also understand each child's trauma story and how this may play out in the life space, ensuring we have the skills and awareness to intervene in a therapeutic way, as opposed to a punitive or shaming one. Problematic behaviours must be contextualised and met with unconditional care and positive regard.

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