

## Threats and rewards—or something better?

“If you don’t do your homework right now, I’m taking your phone away!”

It’s the end of the day. We’re tired, or stressed, and we’ve asked our kids a hundred times already to start on their homework. Even though we might know that there is a better way, we can’t stop ourselves, and a threat slips out.

The thing is, it seems to work! Suddenly the books are opening, the calculators are getting pulled out. In fact, [research shows](#) that threats, verbal reprimands, and time-outs are all effective ways of securing immediate compliance in our children. Which would be great - if our only goal was immediate compliance. The problem is that this compliance is coerced, and if we’re not there to enforce the consequences we lose our ability to influence behaviour. Our kids are more focused on avoiding the punishment than on internalising what we’re trying to teach them!

So if threats aren’t the ticket to getting our children to do something, rewards must be the right alternative, right?

“Once you’ve done all your homework, you can have ice cream!” might be what we say. But we might as well say “If you *don’t* do your homework, you *can’t* have ice-cream”. [Rewards are just threats in disguise](#). If our kids are still relying on us to give them ice-cream or a gold star or their pocket money in exchange for good behaviour, they’re still not intrinsically motivated to do what we’re asking them to do. Rewards, just like threats and punishments, only work if we’re there to dish out the consequences. They simply don’t promote lasting behaviour change and our kids often lose interest, so if we want to keep enforcing the behaviour we need to dish out bigger and bigger rewards, or bigger and bigger punishments.

The truth is, both threats and rewards use fear as a motivator – either fear of getting punished, or fear of missing out on the reward. Fear can be a powerful motivator. But there is another thing that motivates us. LOVE.

Love is a much stronger motivator. It drives intrinsic motivation, or motivation that isn’t reliant on external outcomes like rewards and punishments.

Here are three ways we can use love to help motivate our kids:

1. Do it with them. Kids spell love T.I.M.E. They want to be involved in our world. So, if we’re doing something, and we invite them to join in, chances are that they’ll say yes, even for something as routine as doing homework in the kitchen while we prepare dinner.

2. Make it fun. Kids love to play! Maybe we can help them by playing a memory game with them to remember all the parts of a cell. Or encourage them to learn a song in German to work on their pronunciation. There are so many ways to make even simple tasks fun. Not only does having fun get the job done, it also boosts learning and competence in our kids.
3. Model love and respect for them by trusting that they'll do it when they're ready. Simply say "Can you do your homework when you're ready?", and then let them be. They may need a gentle reminder, but if we step back and let them know that we trust them to get the job done in their own time, there's a good chance they'll do it.

Sometimes they still won't do what we're asking. When that happens, there are two more things we can do.

1. Just let them get away with not doing it for a night. Sometimes they're sick, tired, or cranky. And the truth is that they're not going to be unemployable because they didn't finish their geography worksheet in high school. (That's fear speaking!).
2. Set a boundary. Boundaries are different to punishment. A boundary is something we do to ourselves, whereas a punishment is something we do to others. A boundary could mean that you're available to help with homework until 8pm. Let them know what your boundary is, and then let them decide how to respond to it.

Ultimately, parenting isn't about getting our kids to do things. The only person we can truly control is ourselves. The real focus of parenting is about being the person we want to be, regardless of how our kids are behaving. When we remember that, we can move away from fear-based parenting, and parent with love.



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