

Throw Away the Stickers!: A Perspective on Reward Systems

By Arleta James, PCC

This blog has been putting forth a series of posts designed to respond to parents who have come to realize that their traumatized adoptee doesn't respond to the parenting methods (i.e., time out, removal of privileges, grounding, and so on) that were greatly effective with their "other" children—the typical children.



Today's post tackles why reward systems are frequently ineffective with children whose histories include abuse, neglect and abandonment. Most readers are familiar with these systems as they are put forth by mental health professionals, educators, etc., on a very frequent basis. These reward systems—star charts, flip a card to a different color system or token economies—have come to dominate the way children are managed.

There are many reasons for all adults to begin to reflect on the wide-spread use of these systems. For example, as adults in the workplace, does your boss offer employee rewards on a daily or weekly basis? Certainly, there are employee acknowledgement programs. However, where I work at ABC of Ohio, the boss, Dr. Keck, doesn't have a chart hanging on which we all get stickers for such "normal" activities as arriving to work on time, staying in our offices as assigned, remembering our date books, returning phone calls in a timely manner and so on. These tasks are simply the responsibilities that go with the job. Completing them results in keeping my job and so, I earn my paycheck. Again, this is my responsibility as an adult. Good job performance results in an internal sense of accomplishment and self-worth that no prize or trinket can replicate.

Children are frequently rewarded for completing their "normal" responsibilities. As such, are they provided enough opportunities to gain an internal sense of self as good and successful? Further, isn't the best reward for a child simply a happy parent or teacher?

Regarding the traumatized child he or she, in particular, is often set up to fail with star charts. How many have noticed that right before their adopted son or daughter is to earn the reward, he or she blows the system? Or, in the case the child does earn the reward, does the negative behavior resume in a day or so? The reasons for the lack of results with reward systems are:

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- Children who have experienced trauma often lack cause-and-effect thinking. So, they make the same mistakes over and over. Reward systems, and most other traditional parenting methods for that matter, require the child to have cause-and-effect thinking in order to be effective. This is why the techniques work with typical children—privity to good, consistent care giving their logical thought processes developed on schedule. A behavioral chart requires the child to follow the implied logic—“If you don’t throw a fit for a week, then you get a prize” AND “If you stop fits altogether, you will get more from life AND “If you carry this over to other behaviors, life will get really good!” This set of thoughts requires a logical process the traumatized son or daughter does not have.
- Children that have histories of abuse, neglect and abandonment often have a poor sense of time. They don’t truly realize how long a week or a month is. So, they quit “behaving” because it seems as if they are never going to get the reward. Do you remember what it was like to wait for Christmas when you were a child?
- Traumatized children are often very concrete. The concrete thinker sees the world as black or white. There is no gray. There is limited or no abstract thinking. The concrete thinker views the star chart as a choice, “I can swear or I can go to McDonald’s.” Sometimes the child will choose to continue to use profanity, and other times, he will work the system and get to McDonald’s. It depends on which choice suits him at the time.
- The self-concept of children that have been beaten, raped, left by their parents, institutionalized, etc., is very poor. In fact, some feel nothing but a profound shame about themselves. Self-esteem is the collection of beliefs or feelings that we have about ourselves, or our self-perceptions. Patterns of self-esteem start very early in life. For example, when a baby or toddler reaches a milestone he experiences a sense of accomplishment that bolsters self-esteem. Simultaneously, the child—if in a healthy environment—receives praise and support from his parents. The child experiences feelings of parental love. In fact, parents are the most important influence on self-esteem (Sheslow and Taylor-Lukens, online.)

For traumatized children, parental love wasn’t available in the birth home or orphanage. Today, perhaps even long after the adoption, challenges remain a major source of frustration and anxiety, finding solutions to problems is difficult and they are plagued with negative self-thoughts—“I am stupid,” “I can’t do anything right” or “I don’t deserve a family.”

Thus, the traumatized child blows the star chart because he has no belief that he deserves a reward or because he doesn’t believe he can master the challenge it presents.

Throw away your charts and stickers! Instead go visit Parenting with Love and Logic. This parenting method’s foundation is the natural and logical consequence. For example, the natural and logical consequence of wetting the bed may be laundering the sheets or purchasing the detergent depending on the age of the child. The natural and logical consequence of eating all the cookies in the middle of the night is likely no snack for lunch the next day. The natural and logical consequence of a temper tantrum may be that Mom is just too tired to drive the car to football practice.

Natural and logical consequences allow the child to experience the outcome of his actions and this, over time, contributes to the development of logical functioning thus allowing the child’s cause-and-effect thinking to move forward. Once the child ceases negative behavior, he will develop the good feelings that come with being a responsible, caring member of the family! Self-concept is enhanced!

Parenting with Love and Logic and other books, CDs and tapes in the Love and Logic series by Foster Cline and Jim Fay makes sense, and it is fun parenting once you understand it. Having more fun is the best gift you can give any of your children and yourself!