



4 Ways Extrinsic rewards bit me in the ass

Description

Not long ago I wrote about my daughters school and their [usage of certificates](#) to incentivise reading. The idea is that if a child reads a certain amount each half term, they can get a bronze, silver or gold certificate.

As you may remember, I have spent a lot of time trying to encourage my [daughter to read](#). I thought I had cracked it after long gamified engagement. Little did I know, that in the background the school was undoing all my (and my wife's) hard work.

Olivia has consistently got Gold awards for her reading, we have ensured that every school night for the entire school year she has read. Two weeks ago, she missed two days. This did not seem like that big a deal, two days in an entire year should not mean much in the long run.

Unbeknownst to us, they would be awarding certificates two weeks before the end of term. On top of this, they would be setting the number of reading days for gold to 25. This seems ok, until you realise that there were only 25 school days in this segment.

The upshot was that she missed her target by one day (as she had done some weekend reading) and was awarded her first ever Silver certificate. She cried. She cried more when she discovered that this meant that she did not get a Platinum certificate (something we had never been informed was even a thing!).

She came home broken. I have never seen her so demoralised and I saw all of the work we had done to encourage her to enjoy reading crashing down around us. The school had very successfully converted something that should have been intrinsically enjoyable and made it all about one thing – getting certificates. She was not upset that she had not been reading, she just wanted the certificate.

So many things went wrong here.

- The rules were never made clear. We never had visibility of how many reading days got Gold each half term.

- We were never notified that there was a Platinum certificate available.
- We didn't cheat, we were always honest about the reading she had done.
- Oh yeah. THE SCHOOL USED **EXTRINSIC** REWARDS TO **BRIBE CHILDREN** TO READ.

As I have mentioned [many times](#), rewards should recognise achievement, not be the achievement. In this case, Olivia had started to read only to get the reward. As soon as the reward changed from what she considered the optimal reward, she switched off.

I am pleading with schools to stop doing this kind of thing. It may seem like such a good idea, but it goes against every bit of recognised research on behaviour and rewards (just like performance related pay for teachers and bonus culture). Just Google Overjustification Effect to get you started!

Now I have to start to encourage my daughter to read for the right reasons... again.

Category

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Tags

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