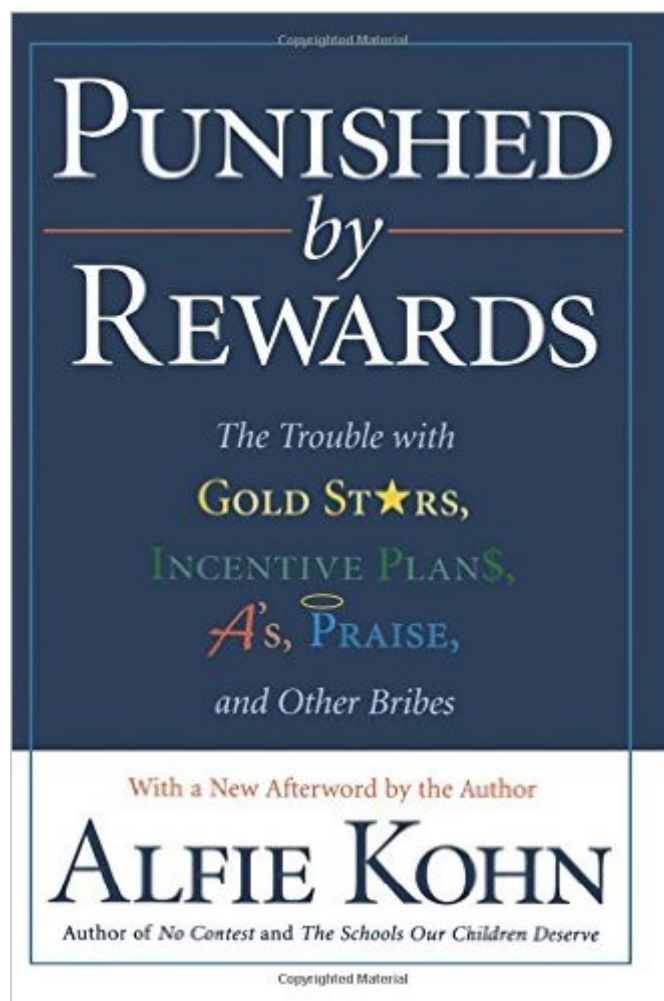


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# Punished By Rewards: The Trouble With Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, And Other Bribes



## Synopsis

The basic strategy we use for raising children, teaching students, and managing workers can be summarized in six words: Do this and you'll get that. We dangle goodies (from candy bars to sales commissions) in front of people in much the same way we train the family pet. Drawing on a wealth of psychological research, Alfie Kohn points the way to a more successful strategy based on working with people instead of doing things to them. "Do rewards motivate people?" asks Kohn. "Yes. They motivate people to get rewards." Seasoned with humor and familiar examples, *Punished By Rewards* presents an argument unsettling to hear but impossible to dismiss.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

So I wanted my students to learn how to read notes on the staff. I had a fun idea to use "notes" to spell words and then the students would decipher the notes to figure out what the words are. I was concerned about them being motivated to do the assignment, so I turned it into a game and use jolly ranchers to reward the team that comes up with the words the fastest. Guess what? As soon as the jolly ranchers were rewarded, the students lost interest. Also, the kids were more concerned about fairness and cheating than the actual activity. More over, certain students took over the competition and other students relied on their already existing expertise to win them the jolly rancher. I tried a different tactic the next period. I decided to promise them the jolly rancher regardless of the outcome, but I still wanted to play the game. I still got much of the same. That night I picked up this book and read a good deal of it. I decided to put Kohn's ideas to the test. The next day, I pointed the kids to the materials, showed them basically how to do it and set them on their way. No games. No

Jolly Ranchers. Nothing. Guess what? All students were learning and involved, students who finished came up to me and asked what to do. They were more than happy to either help other students or figure out more words, or create their own. A complete 180. True, there were plenty who asked, "Do we have to do this?" or "What do we get when we finished?" Which just reinforced for me Kohn's notion that kids have become addicted to rewards. Does this book show you how? No. Thus the 4 stars and not 5. But it does point you in the right direction.

I come at this book as an educator and as someone who has spent a lot of time grading students and helping them navigate the treacherous waters of the standardized testing game. This was on the bookshelf of the tutoring center where I work and I thought I'd see what this man's case was. For the most part, I found this to be an intentional counterbalance to business as usual. It appears that there are a great many reviewers with the psychology background to assess how he may set up BF Skinner as a straw man to strike down. I'm not sure it's necessary to set up Skinner as a man to strike down. I do agree with Kohn, however, that "pop behaviorism" and incentive driven behaviors are pervasive in our culture. Incentive plans in business, grades at school, and rewards at home are commonly thought of strategies for management. Kohn consistently attacks the abuses and excesses of incentives and gives a coherent framework for what makes rewards wrong, focusing on how relationships are fragmented and creativity and attention are undermined. As a teacher who has seen grade obsessed students in tutoring and classroom situations, any book that provides philosophical and psychological research to advocate for intrinsic learning is welcomed. Readers should be aware that this is a *very* radical book. Like other radicals, Kohn is probably better at ripping down the capitalist, or in this case incentive-based, order than in building something up to replace it with. Kohn wants us to reason with people and clearly communicate agreed upon objectives. Has Kohn ever tried to implement these strategies in a classroom of 35-40 urban students?

*Punished by Rewards* is a thought provoking book written for a general audience that argues that use of rewards undermines efforts to teach students, manage workers, or raise children. About one third of the book is devoted to educational issues, one third to parenting concerns, and one third to business concerns. This review is from an educator's perspective. In this well-researched book, Alfie Kohn takes on the educational establishment dominated by experts who advise behavioristic classroom management plans. He challenges many current classroom management practices such as the contingent use of stickers, prizes, parties, gold stars, grades, honor rolls, awards assemblies,

and praise. Any teacher working on improving classroom management and motivating students will benefit from reading this refreshingly original and persuasive book and will have a new perspective on some entrenched educational practices that often go unquestioned. As the author says, you don't have to accept everything he says to see the value in making some changes. Kohn's central thesis is that it is misguided for teachers (and parents and bosses also) to rely on extrinsic motivators and reinforcers to assure quiet, orderly classrooms and manipulate students to behave in ways that are for the teacher's convenience. It is well accepted that punishment is not a way to motivate students. He contends that punishment and rewards are merely two sides of the same coin--and the coin doesn't buy much. Both approaches are applied and popularized behaviorism, a theory attributed to B. F. Skinner and his followers. Citing current research, he backs up his idea that rewards only succeed in the short term. Changes usually do not persist when there are no more "goodies" to be won.

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