



Why Promises Don't Work

It is not true that people do things only because they will be rewarded for doing them. What is true is that every person has an inborn desire for respect. No one—not even a child—wants to be manipulated. When rewards and promises are used to coerce good behavior, children revolt. No reward is better than being an independent, free person.

This doesn't mean you can never say, "Wow, that was a terrific thing you did. Let's celebrate!" But it does mean that you can't develop the kind of self-discipline you're looking for when you say, "If you do a terrific thing, then we'll celebrate." The problem is not with the celebration but with the cause-and-effect condition put on it. A celebration is something you do *with* another person. A reward is something you do *to* another person. No one wants to be done-to.

Kids can be bought, yes. You can get a child to clean up her room by promising to take her to the movies. But you won't develop her sense of responsibility, only her sense of power. The next time you want her to clean up her room, she will ask, "What will you give me if I do?" Now it is she who is doling out rewards and you whose behavior is being manipulated. Was this what you had in mind?

If not, then go back to your values, not straight to the rewards and promises. Try saying, "Gee, this room is a mess! In our family, we try to keep things neat. I wonder how quickly you can get this straightened up?" If the mess is huge, make the task child-size by limiting it to picking up the clothes or just the Barbie stuff. If you can, reinforce the value by cleaning up the kitchen while your child works on her room.

And when you see what you want to see, celebrate.