



# FALSE POSITIVE

By Wilson McCaskill

If you were a salesperson it wouldn't take you long to figure out that in the field of education the best marketing strategy is to attach the word *positive* to what ever product or service you are selling.

If that happens to be pencils then convincing educators, parents and children that using your pencils will deliver a positive experience of handwriting and those pencils will sell, sell, sell.

From educational conferences to classroom furniture and programs to play equipment, if it's labeled positive it is deemed beneficial, safe, progressive and necessary with few, if any, questions asked.

The word is powerful enough to remove risk, negate scrutiny, harness trust and foster confidence because it taps in to the desperate need of schools to be seen as relevant, advanced, attractive and perpetually rewarding experiences.

If successful selling is dependent upon identifying demand and ensuring supply, then the pressure on schools, from all spheres of society, to produce positive outcomes, in all areas of student development, creates an inexhaustible market for the positive, whatever that might be.

Teachers must create a positive classroom environment. Students must attend with a positive attitude and every minute of every school day must make a positive contribution to a child's life and learning. That's a big ask and reaching for anything marketed as positive is an understandable response from teachers, administrators and even canteen staff.

## **Fear of the negative.**

Nothing strikes more terror into the hearts and minds of all in the business of education than the word negative. To engage negatively with a student, respond negatively to a situation, be responsible for a negative outcome, carry a negative opinion, harbour negative feelings, express negative opinions and/or exhibit negative body language is to invite criticism and possibly ridicule.

Sensible discourse, discussion and debate about curriculum, pedagogy and ideology are curtailed and even avoided for fear of being labeled as negative. Tarrd with this brush (and it is easy to be so) your status crashes, your knowledge and experience are devalued, your intentions misunderstood and your character maligned. It could be argued that in education it has become politically incorrect to be anything other than positive.



Why? Because our minds are trapped in the belief that whatever *feels* positive must be right. If it feels good to say it, do it or think it then it must be positive and beneficial. No other test is required. Being told something is positive predisposes us to see it as such. We relax our guard, remove our critical thinking and readily believe we are doing good because it feels good. This lifts our self-esteem, elevates our mood and enhances job satisfaction.

And if we have a negative reaction to something deemed positive then it must be our own negativity that made it so. The fault lies with us and a change of our attitude will prove it.

Worryingly, if something has proven benefit but falls outside the broad band of ideas, practice and beliefs that people have been conditioned to accept as positive, it will likely be experienced as something negative. In feeling negative it will be judged to be of no value and dismissed as requiring no further thought or analysis. Any research that substantiates the idea, product, process or strategy will be refuted and rejected on the grounds that nothing can be of worth if it does not create an immediately positive response.

### **The feel good filter.**

So true is this, things are permitted to do harm so long as they feel good while doing so. Long-term outcomes are immaterial. There is little motivation to engage with anything that promises long-term gains if it first requires short-term pain or discomfort. Immediate gratification is the filter. Any buy-in by users of a product, process or strategy rests on the assurance that it will produce an immediate feel-good. Continued use is dependent on fulfilling that assurance and the delivery of an ongoing positive emotional kick back.

Nowhere is this more apparent in schools than in the unwarranted and excessive use of praise and rewards. Even with large amounts of research, gathered over many years, by distinguished and highly qualified individuals showing that the more we reward people for doing something the less interest they show in what they were being rewarded to do, we continue to reward unnecessarily, praise reflexively and do both excessively.

### **Praise and reward addiction.**

Schools are awash with programs that encourage the *free and frequent* use of rewards. Programs that fly in the face of research and develop authority dependent children who are controlled and motivated by their addiction to praise and rewards; programs that have no regard for a school's obligation to develop independent, intrinsically motivated, self-managing children who understand that the reward of learning is learning itself; children who are in love with learning not the lure for doing so.

In too many schools there is an almost religious attachment to the self-esteem movement's tenet that praise, self-esteem and performance rise and fall together; that they are interdependent. Proof that they are, in fact, independent fails to sway legions of adults from the daily practice of constantly making children feel good to ensure



they will automatically do good and be good. If teachers believe in this erroneous idea of interdependency they can easily escape looking closely at how they teach, why they teach and what children really need to learn if they are to live fulfilling, relationship rich lives in a complex, confusing and rapidly changing world.

## **Our hidden agenda.**

I suspect we have become insecure about our value to children, unsure about our role in their lives and fearful that they will dislike and perhaps even reject us if we question their words and deeds or create supposedly negative emotional discomfort. We have substituted truthful interactions with children for feel good transactions that elevate self-esteem at the cost of self-awareness and resilience. This has left children acutely aware that often our praise has a hidden agenda; that it is manipulative and given with an ulterior motive. And more often than not, that motive is to motivate, encourage compliance or keep them on side.

They can see and feel the true intentions behind false praise and unwarranted rewards. They know when they are being manipulated. Much as they like the means by which we do it, because it does feel good, they resent us for doing it, and resist by in turn manipulating us to offer more to secure their cooperation and effort.

An argument often put forward to justify the use of praise and rewards is that they help to entrench effective learning behaviours. If that is the case, then this operant conditioning needs to be removed at some stage to prove it has indeed entrenched those behaviours. Unfortunately, this rarely happens and in many schools there is little difference in the frequency and quantity of praise and rewards foisted on children irrespective of their age.

Those schools that see the folly of extrinsically motivating children and try to step back from such systems invariably find that self-motivation and self-management are markedly missing. Difficult behaviour escalates with students and parents upset that no longer are children, and by extension parents, being made to feel special for every little thing they do and say.

## **Breaking the cycle of addiction.**

It takes strong, informed leadership with committed and competent teachers to wean a school community of its addiction to the constant supply of praise and rewards. Without this, the unpleasantness of breaking the addiction will see teachers fall back to ways of old and students, distressed by withdrawal, hungrily devour the reintroduced drug of praise and rewards to their own long lasting detriment.

Nothing is more important than building, strengthening and maintaining the teacher student relationship. Nothing erodes that relationship more effectively than the unwarranted and excessive use of praise and rewards does. Nothing weakens a child's independence more completely than dependence on the drug of praise and rewards.

It is not this drug our children need to motivate them in the acquisition of the skills for life and learning. It is connection, based on trust and respect not bribery and threats.



And we must not forget the antidote to addiction is connection. If we want to prepare our children to resist the onslaught of the many and varied, potentially damaging addictions that will explode into their lives as they grow older, then addicting them to praise and rewards could not be more counter productive. Rather, we should make them skilled at building and sustaining connections because connection is not only the antidote to addiction is also the prevention.

### **Positional authority.**

Sadly, some people will say that their school runs better with well-established techniques of operant conditioning without fully realising what they are saying. Everyone has a price and if you can find the price you can manipulate and control the person. You can make the value of everything they do or say conditional on the degree to which they please, serve or obey you. If you enjoy playing master, a school has many potential servants.

It seems hard for some to accept that we are not here to assert our authority over children. Doing so does not create a connection; a strong bond based on mutual respect. Here the research is clear and proves that *“the quality of the teacher student relationship has the main impact on student learning outcomes.”* (John Hattie – Melbourne University. Rosalind Murray – Flinders University.)

### **Compliance and punishment.**

It takes little skill or creativity to exploit the power imbalance of positional authority to ensure compliance. *Do this and you will get that*, can train many children to do this again and again. Many but not all, and those that resist or resent this lure become the obstinate rebels that invite an equal and opposite commitment by teachers to the use of punishments: punishments that are often euphemistically called consequences to hide our discomfort at using them. And we should be uncomfortable with using them because they are something unpleasant we do to children rather than respectfully working with them to solve problems. Working with children takes empathy and skill, controlling and manipulating them takes little more than self-righteousness and power.

There is no shortage of people eager to proclaim that the purpose of school is to prepare children for the real world and in the real world people get rewarded for their work and punished for their transgressions. When it comes to the work argument at least two erroneous assumptions are being made.

*One:* children go to school to work when in fact they go to learn. Interestingly, these same people see primary education as work requiring an abundance of incentive schemes and payment in the form of rewards; high school education as mainly learning, thereby requiring far fewer incentive schemes and barely any payments and higher education as all learning in which participants pay fees for the privilege. Those who fail to move on to higher education move onto work, for which they receive a wage and we can rest assured they would be the last to think of that wage as any form of reward.



*Two*: transgressing children deserve to be punished because they know what they are doing is wrong, and are deliberately doing it. This belief pays no heed to the fact that a person's executive function capabilities are not fully developed until their early 20's; therefore children are inherently less capable of self-control than adults, through no fault of their own.

Platitudes like, do the crime do the time, reveal an attachment to the notion that being made to pay your dues guarantees you will change you ways. Too many fail to see that punishment is not behaviour education. It is conditioning to achieve compliance whereas behaviour education seeks to inform and liberate through the development of self-control.

Purveyors of the *punishment works* argument conveniently forget that our most worrying criminals usually have a record that charts a long history of criminality and incarceration. A quick walk around the exercise yard of any given prison will reveal that most inmates are repeat offenders.

The incarcerated juveniles I have worked with all reported being regularly in trouble at school and all remembered the stars, stickers, and other lures used by primary teachers to reinforce doing and saying the right thing and to tempt them from the dark side.

In spite of evidence to the contrary, punishments seem like a *positive* thing to inflict on children, just as praise and rewards seem ideal forms of *positive reinforcement*. Punishments seem ideal because there are an infinite variety, which can be instigated swiftly or slowly with the added advantage of putting the perpetrator in their place and re-establishing one's position of authority.

Praise and rewards are ideal because they are likewise infinitely variable and re-establish authority with the added bonus of pleasing the giver and the receiver while appearing like a win for both parties.

Rewards and punishments are two sides of the same *behaviour management* coin with equal likelihood of failing to achieve the positive outcome of self-managing, self-motivated, independent learners.

## **Positive praise.**

Praise can be effective but making it so requires control, self-awareness and the commitment to break the habit of excessive, non-specific and unwarranted use.

The first step is to ensure it is warranted. This means giving praise for some thing decidedly out of the everyday or expected. The next step is to ensure it is not excessive. This means avoiding the use of superlatives unless you can justify them. To justify a superlative simply follow it with the word *because* and then give your reasons for using it. In doing so you will need to be specific and point to the skills and qualities of character (virtues) employed by the child. (See page 23 of *The Language section in Play Is The Way, Methodology Manual volume 1*)



Note, you will need to justify each superlative you use. Hence, you would be wise to use only one. Not only is one more than enough, the use of multiple superlatives is overkill that devalues each and every superlative used. It is better to try and develop the skill of not using any superlatives at all. Better still is learning how to use appropriate and well-constructed acknowledgements rather than praise.

This you can do by visiting our website and downloading the article titled: [\*Acknowledging Effort.\*](#)

## **The difference between awards and rewards.**

The following definitions will show why awards are preferable to rewards.

***AWARD:*** *Something conferred or bestowed to acknowledge the merit of some service, effort or achievement that is **not** motivated by the desire for an award or the pleasing of the award giver, but by a **belief in the virtue of the conduct itself.***

Awards are not used to manipulate behaviour. The purpose of giving awards is to acknowledge and reveal to the school community those students who are the role models of behaviour that others can aspire to attain.

***REWARD:*** *Something given in return for some service, effort or achievement, good or evil, that is motivated by the pleasure, profit or benefit, in whatever form, of receiving the reward itself or pleasing the giver of the reward.*

In being used to manipulate, lure and motivate, rewards are a convenient way for those in positions of authority to gain temporary compliance. They are an extrinsic form of control leading to authority dependent children who, rather than feeling supported by the bestowing of rewards, feel evaluated and judged.

Ask yourself, which you would rather receive, an award or a reward?

So would children.

Now ask yourself, what sort of child you want to develop? One that does the right thing because they will get something nice for it or one that believes in the virtue of the conduct itself?

And that's why rewards are simply not a *positive* thing to inflict on children, no matter how much they like them, and no matter how much their parents want you to use them.

*(Please refer to the Ultimate Community Role Model strategy found in The Play Is The Way, Enrichment Manual Volume 3)*

## **Breaking the addiction.**

Adults have become addicted to the use of praise and rewards and our children addicted to receiving them. Like all addictions it takes more and more of the drug to



get the same result. The more drug resistant our children become, the more we supply and the more varieties we manufacture. It appears there is no end to this cycle, or to our pursuit of an ultimate reward that will maximise compliance and guarantee best behaviour. We have been sold *false positives* and are so addicted to them that they seem right no matter the evidence.

We have been liberal and unquestioning in their use and it is time to stop. And when we do, there is a strong likelihood we won't like how it feels and we'll interpret that as negative and be emotionally prompted to retreat to the ways of old. Hopefully, we have the strength and determination to hang in there. If we can, those negative sensations will disappear. In their place will be genuinely positive behaviour education; behaviour education that liberates children to be independent, self-managing, self-motivated, empathetic, lifelong learners.

### **Think about it.**

As the comic strip character Dagwood once said, "*A lot of things make a lot of sense until you really think about them.*" Clinically assessing a product or a strategy or a program's claim to being positive, before deciding to buy in, may be the most positive behaviour we can adopt. And as our children aren't in a position to do that, we will have to keep them safe by ensuring we always do.