



REWARDING PARENTS

By Wilson McCaskill

It's not surprising that many parents of today's primary school children love to see their progeny showered in praise, publicly acknowledged with certificates and uplifted by rewards of one sort or another for this, that or anything it is possible to be rewarded for. They were after all, schooled and reared when the self-esteem movement's central tenet of praise, self-esteem and performance rising and falling together, drove educational practice, especially in primary schools.

The attractiveness of this idea is not to be underestimated. Time has shown that even with overwhelming evidence proving praise, self-esteem and performance are independent and not interdependent, the belief that by simply making children feel good they will automatically do good, is so attractive that it prevails in classrooms to this very day.

Advertising grabbed this idea and with the billions of dollars at its disposal twisted it into; if it feels good, do it. This idea subverts reason and trains all of us to respond rapidly to our emotions and satisfy our cravings with little regard for the cost.

How wonderful if teaching and parenting was as simple as just make our children feel good and they will do good. When little Jack finds it hard to master multiplication we simply tell him he's wonderful and give him something nice for trying, repeat what we have just tried to teach him and magically his answers are correct. And if they are not, we just keep telling him he is clever and fantastic and let him choose the sticker he likes the most, repeat again and all will be well. And if he still can't make sense of multiplication, after teacher has tried so hard to teach him and make him feel good, then he must have a self-esteem problem that stems from his home life or perhaps he just needs more friends at school or to be included at playtime.

So, Jack with stickers all over his shirt and an "I'm a Learning Hero" badge front and center, is given a class buddy who is told he is a legend for helping Jack to make more friends and have heaps of fun in the schoolyard, and for doing so he can have "5 shopping tokens" to spend at the class supermarket on Friday.

Outwardly, Jack appears to be happy with this gross manipulation of his feelings but inwardly his anxiety, hostility and self-doubt are building. People keep telling him he's clever but he feels stupid and resents the fact that people assume he can't see how he is being manipulated. He knows they're lying when they say he's amazing and wonderful and clever because if he was any of these things he wouldn't find things so difficult and he would be popular and he wouldn't need so many people trying to make him feel good all of the time.

He often finds himself at the edge of tears but he has learnt to quickly convert those feelings into anger and frustration. He has also learnt that whenever he looks like he is about to get upset someone praises him and offers him something nice if he will do as he is told. Deeply confused and untrusting of the motives of the adult world that



surrounds him his resentment of their manipulative techniques is growing, as is his ability to resist them. Sadly, he is mastering the skill of crying on the inside.

The self-esteem movement has held sway for too long and created generations of people who have become parents in need of assurance that their children are special which in turn, implies they are special parents. If Jack is not publicly acknowledged for being successful, will his parents be seen as failures by other parents? Will his parents see themselves as failures? If Jack is not rewarded for something, is that not an indication his parents aren't worthy of a reward either? And if one, some or only a few children get a certificate or reward, isn't this a statement that these children are better than all the rest and how will that make the other children and their parents feel?

There would be few schools not trapped by the reward systems of their own design. Invariably, one or several teachers have put in lots of hard work and creative thinking into the design and use of a school's particular reward strategy. They will have been praised for their efforts by school leaders and rewarded by the enthusiastic employment of the strategy by all staff. This strategy will get some uplifting immediate results and feedback will pour in that students are responding and even the most difficult students have been easier to manage because of the strategy. Gratifyingly, parents really like it and there has been a noticeable increase in parent numbers at assemblies to witness reward presentations and teachers have even spoken of receiving complimentary notes from parents for the good work they are doing.

In reality, the results of this new strategy are little different to results in the early terms of the previous rewards strategy introduced, by an equally hard working team of teachers, some 3 or 4 years earlier. Those results, although uplifting and helpful were unsustainable, with data revealing that the positive blip in behaviour and engagement with learning had dissipated fairly rapidly after the introduction of the strategy. Teachers were not deterred in the use of the strategy though. Instead, they adopted a *more freely and more frequently* approach to the use of the strategy believing that by doing so the initial school wide improvements would return.

They didn't and 3 or 4 years later it was collectively decided that another strategy was needed to deliver the long-term results that the previous strategy had not.

Mrs Appleyard was thanked again for all the effort she had put into the strategy's design and asked if she would like to be part of a new team charged with devising a new reward strategy. She declined, feeling a little hurt that her "baby" was being cast aside just because today's kids had become more difficult. It took little effort to find a new team of eager teachers with fresh ideas who assured staff that they would have something fantastic ready in a couple of weeks.

The story of this new strategy would be similar to the one before it. There would be an equal reluctance on the part of leadership to upset its designers by letting it go when its initial effectiveness subsided, and an equal commitment by all staff to use it *more freely and more frequently* when its failings, as a system for developing **independent, self-motivated, self-regulated, life long learners**, became unavoidably apparent.



A couple of years would pass with a blind allegiance to the strategy before murmurings of discontent would surface. These would get stronger as the terms passed with teachers introducing their own strategies to compensate for the whole school reward strategy's ineffectiveness. The integrity of the whole school approach would quickly be compromised and parents would question its effectiveness based on their own children's responses.

Eventually, in-house data would reveal that behaviour and learning had suffered a significant decline. Leadership, responding to the cry from teachers and parents for something to be done, would ask for either a person or a team to devise a whole school strategy that would improve engagement, behaviour and learning outcomes.

Mrs Appleyard knew this day would come and her hand went up gently followed by a clap from staff for her willingness to step in and take the school to new heights. It was all the reward she needed.