

Why It's Harmful to Reward Children for Everything

Rewarding children for good behavior has become commonplace in the American family. But in a recent piece for [The Atlantic](#), Psychologist Erica Reischer cautions that reward systems can be surprisingly harmful to children and their families.

Using the example of the ubiquitous sticker chart, Reischer writes that the system of children earning their way to rewards changes the family dynamic by making it transactional:

"I like to call this phenomenon, in which reward systems become pervasive in family life, a 'reward economy.' In reward economies, kids learn to trade desirable behavior for a reward. Sometimes the reward comes directly, in the form of toys, ice cream, or books; sometimes its value is stored, like currency, in stickers or other objects that can be exchanged at a later date. Whatever the system, reward economies promote a transactional model for good behavior: Children come to expect a reward for good behavior and are hesitant to 'give it away for free'..."

In an [address](#) to the World Meeting of Families, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that families are fruitful for society "because family life is the first and irreplaceable school of social virtues, such as respect for persons, gratuitousness, trust, responsibility, solidarity, cooperation."

It is exactly these "social virtues" that are the most dangerous to reward, according to Reischer:

"In some cases, children are offered rewards not only for mundane tasks like tooth-brushing, but also for what social scientists call pro-social behavior: things like helping, cooperating, and sharing. Studies have shown that offering

children tangible rewards in exchange for caring behavior may diminish future helpful behavior and can erode children's innate tendency to help others."

The family has an obligation to form children to be good members of society. Reward systems may be expedient in the short term, but does there need to be an examination of their greater, and perhaps corrosive, ramifications?

In the [words](#) of another pope, "As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live."

Image: our every day life.