



REWARDS AND SANCTIONS

Reintegrate School Toolkit

Rewards and Sanctions

Understanding Motivation

Children's behaviour and learning can be influenced by two types of motivation:

- **Intrinsic Motivation** – behaviour driven by curiosity, enjoyment, or interest in the task itself. The reward is personal satisfaction.
- **Extrinsic Motivation** – behaviour driven by external factors, such as receiving a reward or avoiding a sanction.

Example:

- A child learns because they love the topic → *intrinsic motivation*.
- A child learns to gain praise, reward points, or avoid punishment → *extrinsic motivation*.

Why Intrinsic Motivation Matters

Research shows **intrinsic motivation** is more effective in the long term, particularly during early developmental stages. Benefits include:

- Higher levels of success and achievement.
- Greater persistence and resilience.
- More creativity and problem-solving.
- Stronger long-term commitment to learning.

Risks of Overusing Rewards and Sanctions

While rewards and sanctions can work in certain situations, overreliance has drawbacks:

- Rewards may lose effectiveness once removed.
- Children may begin to ask, "*What will I get if I do this?*"
- Some children may reject or dismiss rewards (e.g., "I don't care about your sticker").
- SEND learners may feel frustrated if rewards focus on areas of difficulty.
- Rewards can create pressure, leading to anxiety or rushed work.
- Sanctions for non-achievement can damage self-esteem and reinforce feelings of failure.
- Overuse of sanctions creates a negative culture, where children behave to avoid punishment rather than to achieve something positive.

Encouraging Intrinsic Motivation

Instead of relying solely on external systems, schools should focus on developing **self-motivation** through:

- **Independent Thinking** – encourage reflection and self-evaluation.
- **Choice** – offer meaningful choices in how tasks are approached.
- **Positive Thinking** – promote a growth mindset (“I can improve with practice”).
- **Peer Collaboration** – allow children to learn from and support each other.
- **Questioning** – ask open-ended questions instead of giving ready-made answers.
- **Healthy Competition** – use sparingly, in contexts children already enjoy (e.g. sports).
- **Focus on Individual Progress** – celebrate improvement, not comparison.
- **Planning with Pupils** – involve children in setting goals and tracking success.
- **Organisation & Problem-Solving** – allow children to take responsibility and learn from mistakes.

Teacher Language for Intrinsic Motivation

The way adults phrase questions and feedback can make a huge difference. Instead of controlling or directive language, use curiosity and encouragement:

- “What do you think might happen if...?”
- “I can’t think of another way to do this – any ideas?”
- “Tell me about how you achieved that – what worked best?”
- “What do you think will happen in our story tomorrow?”
- “How could we solve this problem differently?”
- “Choose your challenge level for today – how will you get there?”
- “Who can share a hobby they enjoy with the class?”

This approach supports self-reflection, ownership, and deeper engagement.

Using Extrinsic Motivation Wisely

There will still be times when **rewards and sanctions** are necessary. To ensure they are effective:

- Keep expectations **clear and consistent**.
- Use rewards sparingly and link them to effort, persistence, or improvement (not just outcomes).
- Pair rewards with **verbal recognition** so children value the learning itself.
- Make sanctions logical and proportionate (e.g. repairing damage rather than unrelated punishments).
- Avoid humiliation, public shaming, or consequences that damage relationships.

The Role of Relationships

Whether motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic, **positive relationships** between children and adults are the foundation of success.

- Children are more motivated when they feel seen, valued, and understood.
- Adults should model fairness, empathy, and encouragement.
- Motivation grows strongest when linked to **trust and belonging**.

Key Takeaway

Rewards and sanctions can play a role, but **intrinsic motivation** should be the ultimate goal. By focusing on curiosity, independence, and problem-solving, we equip children with the skills to succeed not just in school, but in li

