

Behavior Mod: So Last Century!

Parenting teens is a challenging and complex job, and unfortunately we seem to have this idea in our culture that if parents could only do the Rewards and Punishments thing right, then the problems would be solved. Frankly, I'll bet that you have tried Rewards and Punishments, and they haven't worked. There's a reason for this, and it's not because you weren't tough enough or weren't doing it right.

I was a psychology student at Stanford in the late '70's when Behavior Mod was all the fashion. My goodness, we had some well-trained pigeons in the basement! Unfortunately, since then, the idea that rewarding behavior we want and punishing behavior we don't want will actually change the behavior of humans has been overwhelmingly disproven.* People, it turns out, just really don't like to feel coerced.

Now, most people, if the punishments aren't too severe and the rewards are pretty good, will get with the program and comply, because they see that following along is actually good for them in the long run.

Your rebellious teen is not one of these people. For a rebellious teen anything with a whiff of coercion, even when it's a great reward, will have to be rejected in order to prove "you're not the boss of me." Setting up a system of rewards and punishments with a rebellious teen (or cantankerous employee, or "strong-willed" 8-year-old) will always fail.

I think the reason the Behavior Mod concept has had such a long life, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, is because it's so simple. We'd like to believe it was this easy! Unfortunately, people are not pigeons. When we are in the position of teaching or guiding others, we have to remember that it's our job to provide the space, outside of a power struggle, for them to foresee the consequences of their actions and make choices in their own self-interest. Figuring out a way to do this is challenging and complex. Darn it!

*Please see Alphonse Kohn's *Punished by Rewards*, and Murray Strauss's *Beating the Devil Out of Them*, for extensive reviews of the literature on this.

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