

# How to Raise a Selfish Child

"If you get your homework done then you can go out and play."

"If you clean your room then you can watch a video."

Many parents today use a simple behavior modification approach to raise their children. This approach basically says, "If you do what I say, I'll give you what you want." Unfortunately, children trained this way often develop a "What's in it for me?" mentality. "If I don't get something out of it, why should I obey?"

Behavior modification techniques take advantage of a child's selfishness and exchange a desired behavior for a little gratification. Children raised on simple behavior modification develop attitudes of entitlement and ask the question, "What's in it for me?"

## A Deeper Approach

God is concerned with more than behavior. He's interested in the heart. The heart contains motivations, emotions, convictions, and values. A heart-based approach to parenting looks deeper. When parents focus on the heart then kids learn to ask the question, "What's the right thing to do?"

Behavior modification isn't wrong. It's just incomplete. God made people different than animals. He gave them a heart. When parents use a heart-based approach to parenting, then longer-lasting change takes place. Parents still require children to finish their homework and clean up their rooms, but the way they approach the task of parenting is different.

Instead of just getting things done, parents have their eyes on other heart-related issues. They're looking long-term and often focus on character. In fact, it's interesting to see that many of the misbehaviors that a child presents can be

boiled down to a few character weaknesses. The job of parenting becomes more focused as parents are able to target specific heart qualities and require changes that adjust patterns that children have.

Many children don't seem ready to change on a heart level, so parents must be strategic. Sometimes that means more relationship to open the heart and other times it requires creating a mini crisis to show kids that the way they're living just isn't going to work.

A heart-based approach to parenting often shares values and reasons behind rules. It requires more discussions with kids, helping children understand how their hearts are resistant and the need to develop cooperation. A heart-based approach is firm but also relational. It's a different mindset for some parents and looks at all the interaction of family life differently. Instead of simply getting the room cleaned and the dishes put away, parents are more interested in developing character, values, and convictions.

As you consider your kids, remember the words that God said to Samuel when Samuel thought Eliab would be the next king, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) That was a paradigm shift for Samuel and one that many parents need as well.

### **Is it Wrong to Give Kids Rewards?**

"So," you may ask, "what then is the place of rewards in child training?" Should you reward your child for good behavior or just expect it to be done? Rewards shouldn't be abandoned but instead should be used to encourage the heart. Use them sparingly because the benefit of the reward often decreases in value over time requiring that you increase the reward to get the same result. A reward is best used as a motivation to jump-start a new way of relating, to get the ball rolling in the right direction.

The real issue, however, has to do with the difference between internal and external motivation. Internal motivations come from the heart, the desire to do what's right. You want your son to be clean or neat because it feels good or because of a conviction that it's the right thing to do. When children experience positive internal motivation for achieving or accomplishing something, it often makes them want to try even harder. Those are internal drives or motivation.

External motivations come from the outside and include things like praise, getting paid, having a treat, paying for a broken window, missing a privilege, or seeing disappointment in a parent's eyes.

### **How to Maintain the Balance**

Here's the principle to keep in mind. External motivations are helpful if they build internal motivation. So even though you may give a star or check mark on a chart, talk about character and heart change. "Since you cleaned your room you get a star on the chart. It feels good to have your room neat, doesn't it?" Or, for an older child, "I can tell you've been working on being responsible with your homework this month. I can see that you even are feeling better about getting assignments turned in on time. Here's the reward, but the real reward is what you feel in your heart."

After all, God uses rewards and punishment with us, but he's most interested in the inner motivations of doing the right thing and showing love to others for the right reasons. The Scriptures promise rewards for God's children, but the greatest reward that we could ever receive from God is the internal satisfaction of pleasing him.

We'd be interested to hear what you think of these ideas about motivation. Leave us a comment below with your thoughts.