



DUTY OF DISCLOSURE

By Wilson McCaskill

I can't think of parents who would not expect a doctor to fully inform them of the possible side effects of any medication they were expected to administer to their child. And I can't imagine that any doctor would fail to do so, especially in the highly litigious world in which we currently live.

From simple everyday antibiotics to complex drug regimes for all manner of ailments, we want to be informed of the benefits and risks so that we can make informed decisions. Even the dispensing chemist asks if we have taken the medication before and ensures we understand the required dosage and frequency of use before passing over the most run-of-the-mill cough expectorant.

This need to inform and be informed doesn't just stop at medication. Children facing surgery, non-invasive medical procedures or rehabilitative processes are all painted as clear a picture as possible of what to expect; the benefits, the complications, the upside, the downside, the worst and best case scenarios.

Even with parents present, doctors will talk directly to the child with the aim of giving the child as much information as necessary so that he or she can feel empowered and a significant player in the journey towards their own recovery. They will encourage questions and put no limitation on the type of question asked and leave enough time for both parents and child to reveal their concerns. As much as possible doctors want to inform and educate children about their condition and its treatment so that they can bring themselves to the right decisions, in relation to their own health and wellbeing.

My recommendation to schools is to take a leaf out of the medical profession's book on duty of disclosure when it comes to the use of rewards and praise.

There has been so much research on attempting to manipulate people with incentives. These may seem to work in the short run but ultimately fail and do harm. As teachers we use rewards and praise to motivate children but the research shows that the more we use these artificial inducements the more the students lose interest in what we are bribing them to do.

Just as doctors are required to keep up with changes and improvements in medical practice, teachers must do the same, because the health and well being of their students is at stake. Not many of us would be comfortable attending a medical specialist who did not make a habit of reading the latest research or the bulletins from their governing body or warnings from the health department or notifications from drug companies that improved the efficacy of the drugs they were prescribing. We want and expect our doctors and specialists to be well informed. We want them in the best position to inform and protect us. We don't want them to keep secrets from us. We insist on the full disclosure of our medical condition and the best possible information on the risks and benefits of any treatment they propose.



It is here that we fail our children when it comes to praise and rewards. Too many teachers simply aren't up to speed with the research and too many of those who are, are in denial of its implications on teaching practice. Much of this research has been converted into easily digested books that take no more than time and effort to read. The net is littered with information that eludes to this information or directly uses it. From Ted Talks to the education conference down the road, experts and researchers are delivering the findings that make the ignorant use of praise and rewards inexcusable.

My belief is that there are thousands of teachers in hundreds of schools who know that this blind and ill informed adherence to an educational practice, that does not withstand the weight of evidence and research, is causing and has caused lasting damage to our children. So why do they keep doing it? Well, some don't but many are required to follow the behaviour management policy of the school and any deviation from its *carrot and stick* philosophy is unacceptable and will see them off side with their leaders and colleagues. It all too often will see them off side with students and parents as well.

If you are in a situation where you are using reward schemes and charts of one sort or another perhaps the notion of duty of disclosure will help you change your practice.

The first step is to learn more and I have listed some books that will give you all the information you need to validate a change in direction. Armed with that information you will be ready to educate your students.

The next step is the hard bit. You need to fully inform your patients (students) of the short-term benefits for *you* if they go with the reward scheme and what they will get out of it as well – mainly, momentary feel goods. Then you will need to advise them of all the well-documented side effects and the lasting harm that will result from the long-term use of the reward scheme and the many others you will inevitably have to devise to keep them in control. Don't be backward in this area. Your earlier reading will give you much to share and none of it need be your opinion, it can all come from evidence based research.

The conversation might go something like this.

Teacher: *Girls and boys, you'll be happy to know that I have worked out a way to help you behave appropriately in class and keep you motivated in your learning. Now, I know you have all enjoyed rewards systems before but judging by how disruptive you all were last term I think it is time for something a bit different and a bit more exciting.*

Jim: *I liked Mrs Fevola's rewards in year 2 the best. (The class rumbles in excited agreeance.)*

Teacher: *And what was that Jim?*



- Jim:** *She had a big jar of lollies on her desk and every time you did something she thought was good she would let you go up to the jar and choose a lolly.*
- Amy:** *And they were really good lollies! She bought them herself. (The class rumbles with the excitement of fond memories and various students call out the names of the lollies they liked the most.)*
- Teacher:** *Well, that was very nice of Mrs Fevola but I don't think she would be allowed to do that now.*
- Ben:** *Why not?*
- Teacher:** *Because it wouldn't be very good for your health, Ben.*
- Ben:** *Its not like we ate lollies all day.*
- Jim:** *Yeah, some days I only got one!*
- Teacher:** *That's not the point. Think about it everyone. What were you being trained to want all the time?*
- All:** *A lolly.*
- Teacher:** *Exactly. And by giving you that lolly whenever you did what she wanted you were being trained to want something sweet and nice for pleasing someone. In fact, I'll bet some of you even got a lolly to cheer you up or for changing your mood – would that be right?*
- All:** *Yeah!*
- Teacher:** *So, can you see why that would be bad for your health?*
- Tom:** *Because you'd get the habit of eating stuff that felt good when you were feeling down or upset.*
- Sue:** *And you might eat something that tasted good but wasn't good for you every time you thought you had done good because you thought you deserved it.*
- Teacher:** *That's right. We are wiser these days and we don't do those kinds of rewards anymore.*
- Ben:** *Bummer! (The class laughs in agreement.)*
- Teacher:** *Okay everyone please settle down. Now let me explain the reward system that I think people in Year 4 deserve.*



You proceed to detail a tiered rewards system in which students earn points for a range of appropriate general behaviours and effective learning behaviours. It is comprised of 4 levels (bronze, silver, gold and platinum). By earning points students elevate themselves through the levels; earning a ribbon for each level they attain and a badge should they attain the platinum level. Students can pin the ribbons and the badge to their uniform.

You proceed to unfurl a chart that you pin in a prominent position. This will serve to monitor the progress of every student on the journey to platinum status. It is clearly laid out with columns for points leading to each level and a space to write the auspicious day in which in a level was attained.

You show the class the ribbons and the badge and remind them they can be pinned on their uniforms for all to see. You also advise them that you will present their ribbon at school assemblies and those who achieve the platinum badge will have it presented to them by the school Principal.

The students are especially excited when you tell them that parents will be advised when their children are to receive a ribbon or the platinum badge so that they can attend the assembly.

With all this explained you ask if there any remaining questions. There are a few. These clear up points of detail with a couple of questions that capture the interest of everyone. Namely;

Jim: *Are you the only one who can give us points? Like, can we get points at sport or LOTE or art or for how we behave at recess or lunch?*

Teacher: *Good question, Jim. I will be explaining this reward system to all the teachers at lunch in the staff room today. I have already explained it to Mr Johnson (Principal) and he thinks it is a very good idea and if it works for our class he thinks he might ask all the teachers to use it. For other teachers it will work like this. Every teacher will carry with them a little roll of sticky dots and if they see you doing something they like they will give you a dot. When you get back to class you just stick that dot alongside your name and that will be the same as putting a tick alongside your name when you are in the class.*

Sam: *But what happens if the teacher doesn't have their dots with them?*

Teacher: *I've thought of that. When the siren goes, the teacher will ask you to come to his or her class for you to collect your dot and I will know why you might be a little late because you will have your dot with you...so, don't worry you won't miss out on a dot if you deserve it.*

Sam: *Whew!*

Ali: *(Like the others before her, puts up her hand before being asked to speak) Can people in your class do you in for a dot?*



Teacher: *“Dob you in for a dot.” I like the sound of that (the class laughs) it has a good ring to it. I thought about that too and the answer is, no. Would you like to tell me why?*

Ali: *Eh, because your friends might dob you in even if you hadn’t really done anything to deserve one?*

Teacher: *Yes, that could happen. Can you think of any other reasons? (Bev puts up her hand) Yes, Bev.*

Bev: *It might like, become a competition between groups of friends to see which group can get the platinum badge first.*

Teacher: *Right. And for those reasons and others I think it is best if we leave it to teachers to decide who gets points and dots. Everyone agree?*

All: *Yeeees.*

Teacher: *Good. Now that you all understand how our reward system works it is time to for me share something else with you. Before I do, can I ask you to put up your hand if you think this reward system will be good for our class?*

(Everyone puts up his or her hand.)

Thank you. Now, put up your hand if you would like the system to start today...to start right away?

(Again, everyone puts up his or her hand.)

Now, I’m going to ask both questions again in a little while after I have told you a bit more about this reward system, well about all reward systems really, to see if any of you have changed your minds.

What I’m going to tell you is not my opinion but what scientists who work in the field of brain science and human behaviour have discovered through research. It’s pretty important stuff and I hope you will think about this scientific research carefully.

However, before I share this research with you I have to tell you that praise, and you all know what that is, and rewards are closely connected. You see praise is what we call verbal rewards. They are the words we give you; unlike rewards, which are the things, we give you. A big similarity between both is that they are given to you by someone who has the power to decide if you deserve them or not.

So, rewards are both the words and the things we give you, after you have done something we think deserves one or the other or both.



Actually, anytime we give you something we usually give you a verbal reward as well.

Jim: *Like a double whammy – except you can get a verbal reward without a “thing” reward as well.*

Teacher: *Correct Jim. Okay, here is the first piece of research I would like you to consider. A person who grows up getting rewards too frequently will not develop persistence because they give up and stop trying when the rewards disappear or don't come quickly enough.*

The research also proves that the more you reward someone for doing something, the less interest that person will have in whatever he or she was rewarded to do.

Ali: *So, if you get rewarded all the time for doing things you like doing it can actually turn you off those things?*

Teacher: *Well, it is a little harder to turn you off something you like and easier to really turn you off something you already don't like or find difficult – but, yes rewards can turn you off something you like.*

Rob: *I gave up soccer because everyone kept saying I was great at it when I knew I wasn't. They were just trying to make me feel good because deep down they knew I sucked at soccer.*

Teacher: *Did you actually like soccer?*

Rob: *Yeah, but I just got sick of seeing that liking it wasn't enough, you had to be good at it too. That's why everyone kept lying to me, because they knew I wasn't good enough...so I quit.*

Teacher: *Well, the research shows that the more we think you are falling behind the more we drown you in praise and rewards.*

Rob: *Yeah, tell me about it!*

(An uncomfortable pause)

Teacher: *The research also tells us that giving you lots of rewards sets your brain up to want the feel good chemicals that get released when you get a reward. Your brain starts to want those chemicals all the time - it starts to get addicted to those chemicals and turns you into a praise and reward junkie! Somebody tell us what a junkie is, please?*

Sam: *A drug addict. So, why would you quit something where you're getting lots of rewards for doing it.*



Teacher: *Because like all addicts you need more and more of the drug to get the same feel good and that takes more and more effort. Also, most reward systems make it easy to get rewards when you start and harder as you go along. Addicts are always looking for another dealer who can give them a better deal. Students are always looking for a better reward system or better rewards - and teachers are always trying to find a way to satisfy them.*

Bev: *Like we need a lot more points for a gold ribbon than a bronze ribbon?*

Teacher: *That's right.*

Jim: *But, if the rewards are slowly making you lose interest in what you have to do to get them, then it is going to be harder to keep trying to get rewards.*

Teacher: *Which is why we keep looking for different or better reward systems. Have you noticed that whatever system we start at the beginning of the year gets changed half way through the year.*

Rob: *(With a laugh in his voice) Only because it doesn't work anymore. It suckers us in for a while but then we get used to it and we see that everyone gets the reward sooner or later, so no big deal and its not a thrill anymore – it gets boring.*

Teacher: *You mean the reward doesn't motivate you anymore? (Rob nods) The scientists tell us that rewards do work in the short term because everyone has a price. In other words we can get anyone to do anything if we are willing to make it worth their while.*

Not only that, students who are encouraged to think about rewards, points, stickers, badges, etc become less creative. They don't explore ideas or take chances because if they do they might make mistakes and people don't get rewards for making mistakes. They play safe and only do what's enough to get the reward.

Here are some other side effects of too much praise and rewards.

They can make people more competitive and more interested in putting each other down.

You might find yourself complaining about the rewards that people are given because you don't think they should have got them.

You might find yourself getting upset because you didn't get the reward you think you deserved.

You might find yourself disliking your friend because he or she gets rewards more easily and more frequently than you.



You might find yourself feeling constantly worried because you don't think you will ever be good enough to get to the top of the rewards pile.

You might find yourself scared that at some point people are going to laugh at you or pick on you because you don't have enough points or ribbons or stickers etc.

You might find yourself getting so hungry for rewards that you will do anything to get them.

You might find that your friendship group changes because people only want to be with people at the same level in the reward system.

You might find yourself thinking that you are superior to others because you have so many rewards or you might see yourself as inferior to others because you have so few rewards.

You might find that your class becomes a place of rewards winners and rewards losers – of haves and have-nots.

Now Rob, tell me what you think we, the teachers, will be worried about if someone starts to fall behind in the reward system?

Rob: *That they will be left out or picked on by the others in the class.*

Teacher: *And what do you think teachers will do to try and stop that happening to him or her?*

Rob: *Make it easier for that person to get a reward so that they can keep up.*

Teacher: *And do you think that person will know that we are doing that?*

Rob: *Well I did at soccer!*

Teacher: *And do you think the others in the class will know?*

Rob: *They're not stupid are they?!*

Teacher: *And if that did happen what do you think you would do, Ali? Would you say nothing or would you see it as unfair and say something?*

Ali: *I would say something because it is unfair.*

Teacher: *What about you, Ben?*

Ben: *I reckon it would be a kind thing to do and say nothing.*



Amy: *Then why not just make it really easy for that person to get the top reward? Give them the platinum badge quickly so that they can have it before anyone else. That would be really kind.*

Ben: *No it wouldn't. It would be embarrassing because he hasn't earned it.*

Amy: *Don't you get it Ben? He will never earn it because he is a loser. He doesn't have what it takes, so if you are going to cheat and give him easy points then you might as well go all the way and give him the best reward.*

Bev: *I agree. If you're good enough, you get points or rewards or whatever and if you're not, you don't.*

Jim: *Well I think it should be a choice. If you want to join the reward system then you can and if you don't you don't have to.*

Teacher: *Sorry Jim, I have to step in here. The system will have to be for everyone. Everyone is either in our out It will simply be too difficult to do it any other way. However, I am willing to put it to a class vote.*

(Another troubled pause)

Boys and girls, it is important to remember that every teacher you come into contact with will use our rewards system every minute of every day. Although it will take a lot of points to get to the platinum badge you will have lots of opportunities to earn those points and getting each ribbon is something you can be proud of. All of you I hope will get to the platinum level and get the badge. This will mean everyone in the school can look up to you. I know that all the teachers will be very proud of you, as will your Mums, Dads or Carers.

Before we take a vote on whether or not we will use this reward system we will have a few minutes quite time for everyone to think carefully about everything that has been said. Think really carefully about the research I have shared with you and what it means to your personal development in this class and school.

Now, I have a little surprise before we go to quiet time. Rob, would you come out please and open this envelope and read the note inside. (Rob plods out and does so. The class waits expectantly).

Rob: *In this year 4 trial rewards system, any student who reaches the Platinum level by the end of 2 terms will receive the platinum badge and 4 free movie tickets with complimentary popcorn and a drink to see the movie of their choice at any Hoyts cinema complex.*

(The class breaks into spontaneous applause and excited rapid chattering)



Teacher: *Even more to think about boys and girls. Okay, can I ask you to please settle down and take some quiet time to reflect on everything we have discussed.*

(A couple of minutes pass)

Right, let's take the vote by asking the questions I asked before. Please put up your hand if you think this reward system will be good for our class.

(The entire class puts up their hand)

Please put up your hand if you would like the system to start today...to start right away.

(The entire class puts up their hand)

Well, we will start straight away. I'm giving everyone 2 points for the excellent and amazing way you have conducted yourselves during this discussion and I have been really impressed by everyone putting up their hands before speaking. You have all been terrific and I am going to tell all the teachers at my lunchtime meeting just how brilliant you have all been. Mr Johnson will be very proud of you I'm sure and I reckon he would want to give you all 3 points not 2!

(The class breaks into cheering and rushes chaotically to the chart to be the first to put their points up. Sadly they lapped up every unnecessary superlative that was used and in their externally manipulated excitement are about to behave in a way that will get some into trouble. Others, quick enough to see what was happening and smart enough to realise that an opportunity for additional points had presented itself, hung back and would, in due course, get points for not rushing and be highlighted as a positive example for others.

Rob was already wishing he had not voted for the reward system and hating himself for not being able to do so.)

Even after sharing the research the students voted unanimously to start the reward system. This is not surprising as their brains, after 5 years of exposure and immersion in continuous reward systems, have been set up for an actual chemical need. Sensing the possibility of all the feel goods that might come with each reward and anticipating the sensations they would experience when they receive ribbons and the high that would envelop them if they achieved the platinum badge, they simply couldn't stop themselves voting in favour of the system.

Even those with reservations were lured into voting for the system by the promise of a reward that triggered excitement and anticipation. Rob's previous experiences at



soccer are not enough to override his addiction to systems that manipulate and/or coerce him into pleasing those in authority. Lacking the capability to self manage Rob can be easily manipulated into voting for a system over which he has serious reservations.

He is intelligent and articulate but these qualities are no protection against addiction. He, like others in the class, has been trained to want and respond to the constant and immediate gratification of constant praise and frequent rewards.

Those who want to control him have manufactured his addiction but like most addicts his behaviour has been unpredictable and erratic. At times it seemed as if the reward system in place was working, only to have it all unravel as the lure lost its affect and appeal. Whatever reward system he was immersed in next needed and had bigger and better kickbacks, with a more stimulating structure and processes by which to achieve success. All to no avail though because he, indeed his entire class, do not believe they can be successful; do not believe they can get the best out of themselves or school without an authority figure imposing a reward system that manipulates and motivates them.

There is a strong chance that even if you disclose the research to your class before employing a reward system, they will still want the system used. This is the great sadness of their addiction. They will, in fact, allow us to use systems that undermine their capability to self-motivate and self-manage their lives and learning. They will allow use to try and get what we want (compliance) at the cost of what they need (the skills to be independent learners) and all for a temporary feel good and the illusion of being in charge of their own actions and feelings.

Of course, having a duty of disclosure conversation, as described earlier, will not be possible with younger children. Hence, they can't be given the chance to make an informed decision. A pity, as it is in these early years that we start them on the road to reward and praise addiction.

Perhaps it is fair to say that it is not the duty of disclosure that should concern us with our youngest students but our **duty of care**. And if we were indeed exercising our duty of care would we not be fighting tooth and nail to both avoid and remove the unwarranted and excessive use of praise and rewards in our schools. Would we not be harnessing the wealth of research with the same enthusiasm that we embrace the knowledge of our child health professionals? And in so doing would we not show, to a largely misinformed public, that we are likewise professionals with the courage, creativity and resilience to find a better way (it certainly won't be an easier way) to develop independent, self-managing, self-motivated, empathetic life-long learners?

I believe so.