

HANOVER WELLNESS EDUCATION NEWS

April, 2007

<http://www.hanoverschools.org/wellness/index.htm>

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU?

Over the next three issues of the Hanover wellness education news we will explore the question – What make us do what we do? In April we will examine how rewards can punish. Where does motivation come from? - will be the focus of the May news. June will offer a framework for achieving goals.

We want results. We want high test scores. We want profits. We want to win. Many of us are driven by: the fear of a poor result on the next test; failure to meet a sales quota; failure to achieve what is expected of us by others; or the disapproval of a superior. While we are struggling against stressors and the pressures of life some act irresponsibly. Violence or “acting out” is becoming commonplace in America. Some respond to this by wanting to crack down, achieve discipline, and make those around them behave better. We want to control. The more pressure we feel the more likely we are to use controlling behaviors. Control is an easy answer. It assumes that the promise of a reward or the threat of punishment will force compliance. When we control we are usually not concerned with whether or not participants are interested in or enjoy what we ask them to do.

Psychologists believe (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Dweck, 2006) we should focus on the motivation underlying the irresponsibility rather than controlling others. They recommend we focus on autonomous (self governing) behavior. Those who are autonomous are fully willing to do and embrace what they do with interest and commitment. Their actions come from a true sense of self. These people are the captains of their own ship. Conversely, when we are controlled we act without a sense of personal endorsement. Here, our behavior is not an expression of the true self.

There are two types of controlled behavior. The first is **compliance** – doing what you are told to do because you are told to do it. The second is **defiance** – to do the opposite of what you are expected to do just because you are expected to do it. Some people are highly compliant. Others will defy all the demands of authorities. Those who study behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2002) believe that the price of compliance is high. When we think we have to do something rather than choosing to do something we are not in control of our life.

Controlling environments demand, pressure, prod and cajole people to behave, think or feel in certain ways. Controlling environments get people focused on trying to please others rather than finding out what is right for them. Compliance produces change that is not likely to be maintained. Defiance blocks change. Meaningful change occurs when people accept themselves, take interest in why they do what they do and then decide that they are ready to behave differently (Deci, 1996).

Behaviorism - Do this and you'll get that – is not as simple as that

Alfie Kohn (2001) rocked the education world with his book – Punished by Rewards in 1993. Kohn tells us that many people believe the best way to get something done is to provide a reward to someone when they act the way we want them to. American schools use behavior modification programs, rewards, grades, gold stars and other incentives to reward compliance. We believe that you should deliver a reward for a specific, identifiable, behavior as soon after the compliant behavior as possible. Further, we stress a focus on the reward over the punishment and are consistent in delivering the rewards (this practice is a foundation of psychological behaviorism [Skinner, 1953]).

The belief that “the larger the incentive, the greater the motivation” is called the maximal-operant principle of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Many believe that an absence of motivation is best countered by the presence of an incentive. The wisdom of this practice is rarely held up for inspection. We only question what the “doer” will receive and under circumstances it will be promised and delivered. Many believe that this is THE way to teach and manage people. People in one up positions (parents, teachers and bosses)

promise candy to the girl who remains peaceful and quiet in the car; hold up an A as an incentive to perform in schools; and offer a tropical vacation to the employee who exceeds a sales quota. This is the American way. We are deeply committed to this way of thinking and behaving. Kohn maintains that rewards lead to poor quality work and an eventual loss of performance interest. Further, Kohn and others (Deci, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Dweck, 2000) believe that when the rewards go away children and adults lose interest in a given activity and do not perform as well. Rewards and punishments undermine intrinsic motivation and contact with our inner selves.

The message behind behaviorism (Deci, 1996) is that people are passive and will respond only when the environment tempts them with the opportunity to get rewards or avoid punishments. Further, this view assumes people will do as little as they can get away with. This theory is not congruent with the belief that children and adolescents are inherently motivated to learn and achieve.

Punished by the reward

Rewards often draw people's attention away from the task itself. When we are oriented toward rewards we will take the shortest and easiest path to get there. A pizza franchise once offered a program where students earned points for reading books which they redeemed for pizzas. The message for many of these students was – eating a pizza is more enjoyable than reading a book. Many educators believe that programs such as this cause students to skim through books while racing toward the reward. Practices like this ultimately reduce interest in reading and learning. How many of these students continued to read when the pizzas went away (Deci, 1996)?

Many educators believe that students are motivated to learn by the reward of high grades or test scores. A large body of research (Deci, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2002) has shown that when students learn something in order to put the information to use (such as teaching it to others) they demonstrate a greater understanding of the material than do students who learn simply to be tested. When preparing for tests many students simply focus on simple rote memorization (simply giving back information that was taught). They process information at a superficial level and don't truly understand the overarching concepts (big ideas) that lie behind the information. Further, most who memorize information to recall and recognize it on a test forget it within a few days (in computer jargon this is known as a core dump).

Driven by Curiosity and the need to feel competent

When a student is driven by curiosity and interest she is intrinsically motivated to learn. This student has a richer learning experience, better conceptual understanding, greater creativity and improved problem solving. Psychologists have long believed (White, 1959; Deci & Ryan, 2002) that people yearn to become competent and engage in learning to expand their own sense of accomplishment. The curiosity of children and their motivation to learn can be attributed to their need to feel competent and to meet optimal challenges (being able to do trivial tasks well on the first try does not lead to perceived competence). Perceived competence supports intrinsic motivation. Finally, behavioral experts (Deci & Ryan, 2002) believe that rewards, deadlines, evaluations and grades undermine our intrinsic motivation.

References

- Deci, E. L. & Flaste, R. (1996). *Why We do What We Do: understanding self motivation*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (2002). *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset*. New York: Random House
- Dweck, C.S. (2000). *Self theories: their role in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press
- Dweck, C.S. & Elliot, E.S. (1983). *Achievement Motivation*. In P.H. Mussen (Gen. Ed.). & E.M. Harvard Medical School (2007). *Healthbeat Newsletter*. Ferrari, N. (ed.). January 17.
- Hetherington (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child Psychology: Vol.IV. Social and personality development* (pp. 643-691). New York: Wiley
- Elliot, A., & Dweck, C.S. (Eds.) (2005). *The handbook of competence and motivation*. New York: Guilford
- Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by Rewards: the trouble with goldstars, incentive plans, A's, praise and other bribes*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Kohn, A. (2001). *Punished by Rewards: the trouble with goldstars, incentive plans, A's, praise and other bribes*. (2nd ed.). New York: Replica Books
- Labaree, D.F. (1997). *How to succeed in school without really learning: the credentials race in American education*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Prochaska, J. O. & DiClemente, C.C. (1986). The transtheoretical approach. Handbook of eclectic psychotherapy. J. Norcross. New York: Brunner/Mazel. 163-200.

Rogers, C. (1951). Client centered therapy. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Skinner, B.F. (1953). Science and Human Behavior. New York: MacMillan.

Ryan, R.M. (1982). Control and Information in the intrapersonal sphere: an extension of cognitive evaluation theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 43. 450-461.