

## Intrinsic Motivation

Three researchers watched a classroom of preschoolers for several days and identified the children who chose to spend their “free play” time drawing. Then they fashioned an experiment to test the effect of rewarding an activity these children clearly enjoyed.

The researchers divided the children into three groups. The first was the “expected-reward” group. They showed each of these children a “Good Player” certificate – adorned with a blue ribbon and featuring the child’s name – and asked if the child wanted to draw in order to receive the award. The second group was the “unexpected-award” group. Researchers asked these children simply if they wanted to draw. If they decided to, when the session ended, the researchers handed each child one of the “Good Player” certificates. The third group was the “no-reward” group. Researchers asked these children if they wanted to draw, but neither promised them a certificate at the beginning nor gave them one at the end.

Two weeks later, back in the classroom, teachers set out paper and markers during the preschools’ free play period while the researchers secretly observed the students. Children previously in the “unexpected-reward” and “no reward” groups drew just as much, and with the same relish, as they had before the experiment. But children in the first group – the ones who’d expected and then received an award – showed much less interest and spent much less time drawing.

To be clear, it wasn’t necessarily the rewards themselves that dampened the children’s interest. Remember: when children didn’t expect a reward, receiving one had little impact on their intrinsic motivation. Only *contingent* rewards – if you do this, then you’ll get that – had the negative effect. Why? If-then rewards require people to forfeit some of their autonomy.

*Drive (Daniel Pink)*