

# **Beyond stickers and detentions: Inspiring self-motivation in students**

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## **Abstract:**

How can we motivate students to love learning – and love learning about Islam in particular? What can we do as teachers to motivate students to appreciate being Muslim? Teachers have always grappled with the age-old question of motivating students. The most common practices include rewarding students for good behavior and high achievement while reprimanding students who misbehave or fall below expectations. This interactive workshop aspires to push us to think differently about rewards and punishments in Islamic schools and will encourage participants to adopt a Prophetic model for motivating learners – one that emphasizes practical strategies for self-motivation.

## **Introduction**

“Okay class,” the teacher reminded her students, “whoever gets their work done on time gets a sticker and two points for completing your work and a bonus mark if it’s done well.”

Does this sound familiar? Common in schools today is the need to provide students with incentives, often meaningless incentives to encourage them to stay on task and get their work done. When incentives fail, we try a more reactive approach, one that sounds something like this:

“Now remember, for those of you not paying attention and not using your class time wisely, you’ll be staying with me afterschool to get your work done.”

The interplay between using rewards and punishments has slowly become the norm in most of our teaching and learning experiences whether it is in public or private schools. Teachers rely on rewards and punishments as their core mechanism for classroom management and often feel it’s the only way to get students to behave. In fact, we often praise teachers with the most sophisticated reward and punishment protocols; those with developed checklists, scorecards, and tracking sheets are considered to be the ones that really have a handle on their classrooms. But it begs to question:

1. Are such approaches really working?
2. What are implications of such approaches on the long term maturity and personal development of students?
3. What messages do such approaches send to our students about our ability as teachers to motivate and inspire them toward learning?
4. Shouldn’t students be intrinsically motivated to learn, to seek knowledge, and in particular to be intrinsically motivated to learn knowledge about Islam?

## Positioning the Challenges We Face

There are many challenges in the modern school system that make motivating students a challenge for Islamic school teachers. 1) We work in schools with relatively large classrooms. Managing 20-25, sometimes upwards of 30 students is daunting and without well thought strategies for classroom management it can be difficult to keep all students on task. 2) Students even from a young age are confronted with a fair amount of peer and social pressures. Pressures to conform, pressures to emulate popular trends and icons, and pressures to “be cool” in group settings which often translates to be subversive towards rules and structures. 3) We also work in Islamic schools that often lack adequate resources or resources that are becoming increasingly common for the generation of students we are teaching. Our schools may not have smart boards, laptops, internet access for online research, labs, playgrounds, or well equipped gymnasiums that would engage students in a more well rounded educational experience. So teachers make do with what little they do have and as a result find it challenging to provide students with varied out-of-classroom learning experiences. 4) That said, we also live in an era where good education is considered “Edu-tainment” and we feel obliged to restructure our teaching in ways that are constantly stimulating the way television does. As opposed to the reverence and deep reflection that we had hoped our Islamic studies class would inspire, we end up showing videos and singing nasheeds to keep children entertained. 5) The final challenge we will list, although we’re sure there are many more, is arguably the most daunting of challenges, which the lack of importance that students (and parents) place on Islamic studies. In the absence of high stakes implications in Islamic studies, students know that when push comes to shove, their grade in Islamic Studies is not going to determine which college they go to. Keeping students motivated in Islamic Studies is as a result among the most challenging of tasks.

Within the realities of the challenges that we face, the question remains, how then do we motivate children to learn? We know in the Islamic tradition the concept of *fitrah* (natural inclination) tells that children and adults (all learners for that matter) have a natural inclination toward goodness – but it depends on how it is presented to us. Similarly, Maria Montessori in describing what she calls “the secret of childhood” she emphasizes that children have a natural curiosity to learn and that we rob them of that natural curiosity by thinking we need to provide external motivation. At the same time we must consider the implications of rewards and punishments on students. The more common critique is that rewards for a select few disengage those who consistently miss the mark. The response to this is to “reward everyone” which may not be the answer either because it is important to acknowledge achievement. But every child achieves and has the potential to excel – just in different ways. The essential issue with rewards and punishments is that we measure all students to a similar standard on the assumption that all students started at the same starting line. Best practices in equity and inclusive education today tell us that we as educators need to acknowledge the varying levels of interests, aptitudes, and aspirations of each student as individuals. And we need to then consider how to motivate students to compare themselves to themselves as opposed to the progress of each other.

The aims of this paper (and workshop) is to help Islamic school teachers rethink the challenge so many of us have put forth – how can we get students to love being at an Islamic school, to love learning, and to love learning about Islam.

## **Implications of Rewards and Punishments**

Some research on rewards and punishments as tools for effective classroom management argue that we need to push toward preventative measures as opposed to trying to “cure problems.” From the conception that we are trying to “manage” classrooms, our roles as teachers come across as reactive. We see disruptions, we experience misbehavior, and students express disinterest so we try to react either with rewarding good behavior as a way of encouragement or we reprimand students hoping that it will resolve issues. But educators are now thinking more deeply about how to move beyond a “crisis centered approach.”<sup>1</sup> Some argue that using rewards “disrupts relationships, ignores underlying reasons for behavior, discourages risk-taking and undermines interest in immediate tasks.”<sup>2</sup>

As an alternative, these educators argue that we need to nurture students’ emotional intelligence and not simply their intellectual intelligence. Nurturing emotional intelligence will prepare students to reflect on themselves, assess themselves, and manage their emotions in way that allows them to effectively express their concerns with maturity – even at a young age. Emotional intelligence allows students to become self problem solvers and it also allows them to build positive relationships with their peers and teachers. Most importantly, “emotional intelligence enables teachers to create a classroom environment free of standard reward systems.”<sup>3</sup>

One practical example of emotional intelligence in practice is the Conscious Discipline model where teachers build community, called “School Family” and teach children how to transform conflict into opportunities. Such programs emphasize teaching social-emotional life skills where children are motivated by caring, connecting, and contributing.<sup>4</sup>

Another practical approach that serves as an alternative to punishments in this case is the use of the principle of logical consequences. Dreikurs & Grey find that if a child disrupts classroom learning, teachers should simply remove privileges from that student to the extent necessary to preserve learning for other students. The benefit for such an approach is that:

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<sup>1</sup> Lorrie L. Hoffman, Cynthia J. Hutchinson, Elayne Reiss (2009). “On Improving School Climate: Reducing Reliance On Rewards And Punishment.” *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, Vol 5 No. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman, et. al. (2009)

<sup>3</sup> Hoffman, et. al. (2009)

<sup>4</sup> B.A. Bailey, (1994). *There's got to be a better way: Discipline that works*. Oviedo, FL: Loving Guidance; Bailey, B.A. (2001). *Conscious discipline: 7 basic skills for brain smart classroom management*. Oviedo, FL: Loving Guidance.

1. It immediately stops the child from continuing to impose on the rights of others.
2. It creates an opportunity to enhance the child's moral development.
3. The loss of a privilege motivates the child to learn new social skills so that he can regain the temporarily lost privilege.
4. Helping the child learn new skills strengthens the teacher-child relationship.”<sup>5</sup>

These two approaches of nurturing emotional intelligence and logical consequences are among the many alternative approaches to motivating students toward positive classroom behavior. Educators of this bent argue that rewarding students is not inherently a bad thing necessarily but it does condition them to think that every time they do something well they will be tangibly rewarded. Nor do rewards build capacity and understanding among students for the value of the learning itself. If anything the use of constant or systematic systems of rewards create a power hierarchy that position teachers as the repository of rewards and the children those that receive rewards only when they comply with the teacher's requests.<sup>6</sup> Rather students often appreciate gradually being given greater responsibility and privilege, which in itself is a reward and one that builds maturity.

### **Inspiring Self-Motivation**

There is no denying that from within the educational approach of the Prophet Muhammad (s) was to build the people around him into leaders – leaders of the Ummah and their families but arguably more importantly, leaders of themselves over their own *nafs* (inner selves). The Prophet (s) said: “The world is sweet and green and verily God has set you in it as vicegerents observing your behavior.”<sup>7</sup> Teaching students to become vicegerents or *khulafa* over themselves, their families, and their communities is at the very essence of the vision of Islamic schooling. Yet so much that we do in Islamic schools is far from being effective in nurturing such sentiments.

If our schools are to move toward a more nuanced approach to discipline, classroom management, and motivating students – one that is not solely reliant on rewards and punishment then we must reconsider our approach in its entirety. In the remainder of this paper, we will suggest a series of considerations that will help us push beyond stickers and detentions and instill in students a sense of self-motivation and aspiration.

#### **1. The impact of making learning real and relevant**

In Shaykh Fattah Abu Ghuddah's seminal work on the teaching methods of the Prophet Muhammad (s), he says about the Prophet that,

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<sup>5</sup> R. Dreikurs & L. Grey (1968). *Logical consequences*. New York: Meredith Press.

<sup>6</sup> Philip S. Hall, (2009) “Beyond Rewards: Reclaiming Children and Youth.” *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 18:3 (Fall 2009): 49-53.

<sup>7</sup> Sahih Muslim

“He used to address each person according to the capacity of his or her understanding and in a way befitting his or her circumstances. He used to be very cautious with the hearts of beginners; for he would not teach them what he taught the more advanced. He used to answer every question of the inquirer with what concerned him or her in the most appropriate manner.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the essential ways of engaging students is simply through the way we teach. As the Prophetic example outlines, teaching children in ways that befit them as individuals can itself have a significant impact on classroom management. When students feel connected to the teacher and connected to the course material, the need for incentives subsides. To make learning real and relevant for students we need to deeply understand our students, listen to their concerns, acknowledge their interests, and appease their inquiries. It is by no means an easy task especially when we are confronted with large classes, but over the span of a year, if a teacher makes a concerted effort to address each child within their individual needs, it can have a significant impact on self-motivation in our classrooms.

## **2. The impact of caring**

We often overlook the impact that something as simple as caring can have on the connection that we build with students. Ask yourself this: who was your favorite teacher, the one who stands out to you the most from your schooling days? Inevitably, it'll be the teachers who cared. Whether they expressed care and concern for you as an individual or they sincerely cared about their teaching and made their teaching engaging, the point is that they exhibited a high level of personal engagement.

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle (s) kissed Al-Hasan bin Ali while Al-Aqra' bin Habis At-Tamim was sitting beside him. Al-Aqra said, "I have ten children and I have never kissed anyone of them," Allah's Apostle (s) cast a look at him and said, "Whoever is not merciful to others will not be treated mercifully."<sup>9</sup>

Even when you have the most seemingly unruly child or the student that is always looking for attention, we must remember that misbehavior has deeper roots. Students misbehave for a reason that is more complex than the outward shows of disrespect or bullying. In order to get to the root of their problem, requires time, patience, and expressions that we as teachers care to understand their issues. When a teacher acknowledges the inner emotional state of a student, students connect with that teacher in a much deeper way. Students realize that this teacher is here to support me beyond helping me through the test. The support is beyond curriculum and that if I as a student am enduring inner hardship and struggle, this teacher is here to support me.

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<sup>8</sup> Abdul Fattah Abu Ghuddah, (2003). *Prophet Muhammad (s) The Teacher and His Teaching Methodologies*. Pakistan: Zam Zam Publishers.

<sup>9</sup> Sahih Bukhari

### 3. The impact of praise and verbal encouragement

“The Messenger of God (s) was always pleasant, good-natured, and easygoing. He was neither callous nor harsh, nor abrasive, nor offensive, nor insulting, nor flattering. He overlooked what did not please him. One who desired something from him did not lose hope, nor was he disappointed ...When he spoke the gazes of those sitting in his presence were lowered [so still and attentive] it was as if there were birds standing on their heads. If he went silent they would speak but would not quarrel in his presence. Whenever one spoke in his presence everyone else would keep silent until he finished ... He would laugh due to what made them laugh and marvel at what made them marvel.”<sup>10</sup>

Often students are not looking for lifeless stickers and short-lived candies as rewards. Rather what stays with students for years to come is the verbal praise and encouragement that a teacher gives. How many of us as teachers can recall the time that someone praised us, encouraged us, or told us that we had potential. It sticks. And how often can we remember the exact experience of someone criticizing us, belittling or demeaning us? Words have a significant impact on us. And if we emulate the Prophetic example of marveling at what makes our students marvel we will connect with them in ways that we least expect.

Similarly, it is essential that we recognize student contributions. Equivalent to praise and encouragement is simply recognition. Often when we teach we facilitate class discussions but we often spend more time as teachers facilitating and thinking about the segue to the next topic rather than listening and responding to what students are saying. Acknowledging student contributions in this sense also has the potential to make students who might be among the most difficult to reconnect with classroom learning.

In my own experiences, I’ve seen how encouragement that I’ve given to students in written feedback on assignments can completely turn around their engagement and participation in class. When I’ve written feedback on essays such as “This is a very well written essay and these are very important perspectives for your peers to hear about; you should bring these thoughts up in class discussion more often. We could all benefit from you.” I’ve seen students go from the most difficult to “manage” to those that become sincerely engaged in learning.

### 4. The impact of responsibility when students are given opportunities to lead

The Prophet (s) said: “Learn what you wish to learn; for God Mighty and Majestic will never grant you benefit until you act on what you know.” We know that in the Islamic tradition, there is a major emphasis placed on the interplay between *ilm* (knowledge) and *‘aml* (action). But we underestimate often the impact that we can have on students when we

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Tirmidhi, *Al-Shama’il Al-Muhammadiyah*

allow them to lead, or to act, or to be in a position of responsibility. Most students, not all necessarily, but many benefit from opportunities to lead. Even students who seemingly feel disconnected, introverted, or shy, appreciate opportunities to lead that are structured, not overwhelming, and tangible. The point is that if we increase the opportunities for students to lead in classrooms and within the school as a whole, it can serve as an effective tool to self-motivate students.

Take for instance a class with young students in Grade 2 with group presentations at hand. Students who are presenting is one role, but other students can also have responsibilities. For example, some students can be responsible for handing out and collecting feedback forms, some can be responsible for setting up and cleaning up the classroom, a few students can take care of lighting, and a few can introduce and thank the presenters. Assigning responsibility builds capacity and it also requires students to be active in the learning process. We often have to bribe students with incentives like stickers to keep them attentive but well designed responsibility can achieve that and much more.

## **5. The impact of self assessment**

It is reported that Umar ibn al-Khattab, one of the greatest students of the Messenger of God (s), said: "Take account of yourself before you are taken account of. Evaluate yourselves before you are evaluated."

We know that as believers we are encouraged to take our self to account before we are taken to account, but how do we as teachers engender such an ethic among our students? How might we push our students toward self-assessment? Often when we punish or reprimand students we do so with the intention that it will help them understand the consequences of their actions. But do they? Similar to what was discussed earlier about logical consequences, students will mature much faster if we encourage them to think about the implications of their misbehavior on others and if we tell them to brainstorm their own consequences as well. The combination of implications and consequences self-derived by students can have a significant impact on the ability of students to develop self-assessment, emotional intelligence, and a recognition of how their actions impact others.

## **Concluding Thoughts: Enduring Understandings**

If there are a few closing thoughts that bring this paper together, it is that as Islamic school educators we need to think more deeply about the purpose and impact of using rewards and punishments to motivate students or to address misbehavior. Each approach that we use in our classrooms is based on a set of assumptions and implications. The argument being posed in this paper is that rewards and punishments may not be the most effective way to socially, emotionally, and intellectually help students grow and mature. Stickers and detentions can assist learning in the short term and should be used sparingly, but they do not build student capacity and emotional intelligence. As an alternative, five considerations for classroom practice have been outlined that are grounded in the Islamic

tradition and that have the potential of serving as more strategic approaches to engaging learners in learning.