

You Promised!

by Dr. Donna Riter

“She lied to us, she promised we could see the video if we all did all of our homework this week. We did what she asked and now she says we can’t. Teachers lie and they’re never fair!”

For Kevin, this outburst (which included inappropriate language, knocking over furniture and running off with the video) was an expression of frustration and anger toward what he perceived as a lack of “fair play”. Kevin did not know that even a teacher with the best intentions who sets up criteria for work equaling reward, can suddenly, without warning, change direction and seemingly not live up to what was promised. The result for the teacher was chaos and conflict in the classroom in a situation she had hoped would be positive. The result, for Kevin, was another piece of “evidence” to add to his ever growing belief that adults are unfair, don’t say what they mean, and above all, can’t be trusted.

If we go back and look at what precipitated Kevin’s outburst, we can discover both the perspective of the teacher and her students.

When I met with Kevin’s teacher, she explained the completion of the homework assignments by all students for the first time demonstrated the motivator they had selected (the video) was responsible for the desired result (completing the work). She explained that since this motivator had produced results impossible to achieve previously, she had also anticipated the students would behave as the reward materialized.

Why then, on the morning when the video was to be shown, had the students refused to follow even the simplest directions, been consistently rude to each other and to the classroom staff, used inappropriate language and left their seats without permission? After the confrontation with Kevin, the teacher’s belief in external motivators, even when chosen by the students, was shattered. She concluded that rewards do not produce their anticipated results. But was her conclusion accurate? The reward of the video had motivated the students to complete all of their homework assignments for the week. What it had not done was motivate them to behave the morning before the video was shown.

As we reviewed the sequence of events, I realized that the teacher’s original objectives, when implementing the reward of the video, were there fold:

1. to get all the students to comply with a directive (homework completion)
2. to get the entire class to work cooperatively toward a common end (the video)
3. to shape/change/modify their behavior concerning compliance through reward for positive performance

Even though these original objectives had been accomplished, this morning Kevin’s teacher added a new “twist”; that the students behave the morning the video was to be shown. At the time of the original “agreement”, the only criteria that was shared with the class was “all

homework done for one week by everyone equals the reward”. There was no discussion that other factors, such as future behavior, could alter the agreement.

Having spoken to both the students and the teacher, the possibility existed that the students (Kevin in particular) and the teacher did not share the same goals for the reward promised. For the students, the work had been completed because they believed through a process of choices, that seeing the video meant enough to them to do the task they normally refused to complete. Both parties had a clear understanding of their own expectations, but there had been no external or verbal clarification to one another.

Now that task would be to clarify these priorities as a reactive rather than a proactive measure. What was the most important piece to establish with the students in the room at this moment; that performance when accomplished within expectations will receive anticipated rewards, or that performance, when recognized as possible, will also include other expectations (i.e. behavior)?

Although, in “real life” things do come up, people do change their minds and they may add conditions, teaching about the realities of life’s frustrations is a long term goal for Kevin and his classmates. If we are first introducing a system of rewards in the classroom to try to shape new behavior, then the reward must be given if the original conditions are met. If the students get no reinforcement for completing the homework, any future attempt to use rewards as a mechanism for shaping behavior will not be successful. The students will not believe that it is their behavior which gets results but rather a function of either good luck, bad luck, or the whim of the adult.

Are Kevin’s emotions of confusion and anger excuses for his behavior? Absolutely not! Putting the already established classroom consequences for inappropriate behavior as it occurs into action, and not using the reward as the “big stick”, will let Kevin and the other students know that the daily expectations haven’t changed. Enlarging the consequences to include the reward will only serve to establish an atmosphere of mistrust and disappointment. Following the rules of the classroom and keeping to the original plan for special incentives will allow the student to believe that “what you say” is truly “what you mean”.

Ways to enlarge your “tool box” when using classroom incentive systems:

Establish your goals (in writing).

1. Break them down into long and short term goals.
2. Know your priorities (and share them with the students).
3. Establish criteria of accomplishments (encompass any factors that would negatively impact on your ability to follow through with the promised reward).
4. Give every student input on the “what” and “when” of the reward.