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HEALTH & WELLNESS

## Want to change your teen's behavior? Study suggests focusing on the positive

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**By Linda Carroll**

Parenting is hard, and parenting teens brings about an entirely new set of challenges, from keeping their rooms clean to getting them home before curfew.

But, a new study suggests parents who want their teenagers to keep their grades up could have better success if they focus more on rewarding good behavior and less on threatening to punish the bad.



— British researchers have found that adolescents focus well on positive incentives, but have difficulty staying motivated to avoid penalties. Getty Images

According to the report, published in PLOS Computational Biology, British researchers have found that adolescents focus well on positive incentives, but have difficulty staying motivated to avoid penalties.

The study shows that teens and adults learn in different ways, according to the study's lead author Stefano Palminteri, a researcher with the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London. It suggests that "in some cases positive feedback may have more of an effect than negative feedback on learning" in adolescents.

Joseph Allen, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, was not involved in the new research, but agrees that teens are more likely to be coaxed into learning new habits – like cleaning their rooms on a regular basis – if they're offered a reward rather than threatened with punishment.

"Rewards give them something they want to think about," Allen said. "Punishment is something they don't want to think about. So if you really want to motivate a teenager you're going to have better success if you're trying to engage their attention by giving them something positive to think about."

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To get a better idea of how adolescents learn, Palminteri and his colleagues rounded up two groups of volunteers for their study – one group of adolescents aged 12 to 17, and the other adults aged 18 to 32. The volunteers were asked to play a special kind of computer game.

"Participants [saw] different pairs of abstract symbols on the computer screen and they had to choose one of the symbols by pushing a button," Palminteri said. "The symbol they chose could either result in a reward – winning a point, a punishment – losing a point, or no outcome. Participants all wanted to get as many points as possible, as they could earn up to a ten pound bonus for getting a high score."

"At the start of the task, participants didn't know which symbol was which and had to try to learn by using trial and error which symbol in each pair was more likely to result in a good outcome by learning from the rewards and punishments they received," Palminteri continued.

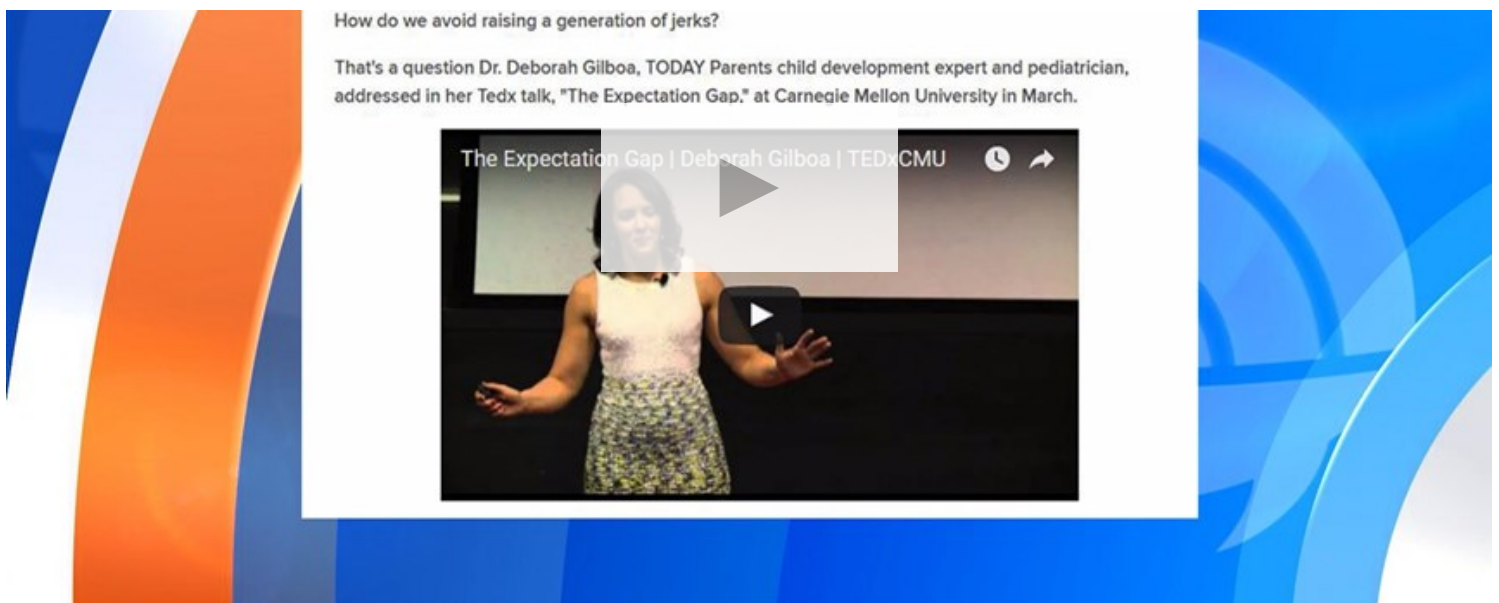
In the end, adult volunteers learned from both positive and negative feedback, while the teens responded only to the positive.

Palminteri suspects this is because the part of the brain that processes punishment and consequences isn't fully developed in adolescence.

— "Very few teenagers are intrinsically motivated to clean their rooms," said Joseph Allen, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. "So if she cleans her room for the next two or three times and it becomes a lifelong habit, reward the habit." Shutterstock

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While some parents may be concerned that this approach promotes bribing their children, Allen says this is not the case.

"When people go to work they get paid. We don't consider this a bribe, just that hard work gets you rewards," said Allen. "Very few teenagers are intrinsically motivated to clean their rooms. So if she cleans her room for the next two or three times and it becomes a lifelong habit, reward the habit."

Still, Allen says this line of thinking shouldn't be taken too far. "You don't want to pay your teen not to come home drunk at night," he cautioned.

Adolescent psychologist Neil Bernstein, author of "How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble and What to Do If You Can't," cautions parents to make the rewards reasonable – and only occasional.

“You don’t want your child to get the message that the only reason for him to do something is to get paid off,” said Bernstein.



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