

Is it Possible to Bribe the Brain?

It's common to use different kinds of rewards or incentives to motivate students. Let's assume we've already had a long chat about how engaging instruction, and making learning relevant, impacts motivation. For that matter, we've also talked about intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation. Now that we're clear on those issues, let's talk about using incentives.



It's not always easy finding something that works for adults, and motivates kids. To further complicate this, reward centers in the brain, are activated differently. Ever notice that when a student is upset, the promise of getting to choose a preferred activity doesn't always work. Learning about the brain can help us better understand why this is the case. **In other words, we have to speak the language of the brain, to bribe it effectively.**

The brain develops from the bottom-up. It can be regulated from the bottom-up or the top-down. Top-down regulation can work when all parts of the brain are accessible. Bottom-up regulation is necessary when higher parts of the brain are not accessible.

During a perceived threat, the brain shuts down, starting from the higher regions moving to the lower regions. Stress chemicals shut down the frontal cortex (thinking brain). Now, physically you cannot think. Being asked, or demanded, to think, will likely make you escalate or shut down. Next the limbic brain (emotional brain) shuts down. The only part of the brain left functioning is the most primitive, the brain stem (survival brain).

Case Study:

We'll explore some typical classroom situations through the lens of our brain knowledge:

Allie is in 4th grade. She loves music, and has a close relationship with the school librarian. She often struggles to pay attention and can be disruptive to other students. There have been some challenging things going on at home for Allie recently.

Allie's current teacher, Mr. Dunn, has said that if she reads for a certain amount of time then she will be able to listen to an iPod for a few minutes. When Allie is regulated, this might work really well.

Behaviors that fit with our values or beliefs can activate pleasure centers in the frontal cortex.

Mr. Dunn has noticed that Allie's struggling to pay attention and seems sad. He told her that if she reads for a certain amount of time, she could have a break to spend some time with the librarian. ***Behaviors that create positive emotions or are relational, can activate pleasure centers in the limbic system.***

Allie often seems off task at the same time each morning, just before independent reading. One day while talking to her about how she was doing Mr. Dunn found out that she often didn't eat breakfast. He arranged to have her take a break and have a snack 5 minutes before reading time began each day.

Behavior that impacts appetite or sleep needs, as well as sensory input, can activate pleasure centers in the diencephalon.

One day, Allie is very upset. She refuses to do her work and pushes her books onto the floor. Mr. Dunn walks past her desk and puts down a green colored pass. This pass gives Allie permission to leave the room and go to a designated "regulation station." This area provides opportunities such as: music, Heart math, breathing exercises, movement, etc.

- Allie is operating from her lower brain. She doesn't have access to the higher parts of her brain, and the incentives that appeal to those parts of her brain, won't work in this moment.
- **The more highly aroused, the less options that exist;** options for Allie's behavior, and options for rewards that will be effective. In these highly dys-regulated moments, Allie needs help regulating.

Behavior that is rhythmic and patterned can move the nervous system back towards a regulated state.

What are some possible implications?

1. Something can work one day, and not another day.
2. We need to differentiate teaching and expectations regarding behavior, just like we do with academics.
3. A student may be trying to avoid work, but it's also possible that he/she is trying to avoid feeling a certain way, or having a certain experience.
4. You can't do this alone. There must be a team approach.

Other things to consider...

- You can't assume that students are able to self-regulate without being explicitly taught.
- You set the tone for the room, your ability to regulate directly impacts what will happen next.
- A student's behavior is not about you, it's about the state of his or her nervous system; don't take it personally.