# Transcript- Episode 50

Beyond Praise, Rewards, and Punishment

Welcome, everyone, to Episode 50.

And today we're diving into the concept of praise and rewards. And we'll just throw a little bit of punishment in there, just for good measure.

And even punishment. That's right. Thank you, Kristie. So how often? I mean, if you had a dollar for every time...

I'd take a penny, Julie.

If you had a penny for every time we heard these myths or these pervasive beliefs about behavior, we would be so, so wealthy. And one, I'll just start with one myth that we hear often is, he's doing it for attention. Or she just wants attention.

Sometimes we hear, if we let them get away with it, then they're all going to start doing it. And the third one is, they just need consequences in order to learn to not do the thing. Right?

Right.

Right. Or to do the thing, or... You know, it's so funny. We were sitting by the fire last night, and the dog was doing something, and Mike said, he just wants attention.

And I was like... And I almost, almost, Julie, landed into a whole thing about behaviors, communication, and needs versus wants. I just couldn't help myself.

Did you give him a handout at the fire?

No. I should have. I should have given him the handout to this episode.

I'm afraid he might've put it right in the fire, Kristie.

Probably. But in real life, friends, you've probably heard those things as well. You've probably heard every variation of that they just want attention, that we're letting kids run the roost, that... I even saw something on social media the other day that a mom was shopping at a big box store, and the kid was having a meltdown.

And she was being this very permissive parenting, because that's how people interpret all of this, is very permissive. And she was like, oh, okay, you're not ready to do this yet, and okay, you want to lay down on the floor? I'll just lie here next to you until you're ready to get up. I mean, it was just like this over the top.

And it's like, we understand that we are here to shape the morals of children, and we're here to help people become good citizens. So this is not about permissiveness or about letting kids who don't yet have a prefrontal cortex make the big decisions, but there's a lot of myths about praise and rewards and punishment that we need to debunk.

That's right.

And I think we're questioning a lot about what we were taught as kids about praise, rewards, and punishments. And we know now so much more through brain science, through real classrooms experience, and what kids are telling us about the ways in which they need support and not control over.

And so today, we're just really starting that conversation to help you if you're an administrator or a teacher or a parent, and you're struggling with these concepts, we're going to help shape them to help you understand how to best support students, especially those that are in inclusive classrooms, especially those who have behaviors that challenge us.

Yeah. So the big question is, you know, are praise, rewards, and punishment helping or hurting, you know, that kind of continuum, our efforts to really create this sort of inclusive classroom where everyone belongs, right? So the tools that we currently use are everywhere, and what we're going to do is use the download for this episode as a way of moving away from them. We have lots of other podcast episodes and resources and online courses that are all about behavior.

So today, we're just sort of like, as Julie said, touching on or, you know, giving this kind of overview of what to do instead of sticker charts and prize boxes and clips and token economies and how do we make sure that we are understanding and seeing students who are anxious or disengaged or dysregulated, which is like every teacher also tells us that's on the rise.

So what do we do in those circumstances? So how about we jump to, you already alluded, Julie, that we know better. So what is it that we know better? What do we know better about connecting and co-regulation or how to respond to students instead of this notion of praise or rewards or punishment?

So a couple of things. We know that those traditional tools that we're talking about, and Kristie, you named so many of them, but I want to add dojo systems and all those electronic systems that are so pervasive and we don't really think of them as behavioral supports in these ways. And they fall short in lots of ways because praise feels good in the short term, but it really hooks kids on the approval of others. It takes the onus of motivation outside of the human child and puts it on the adult who has that, quote unquote, control over them.

Even rewards. So this is what people often argue with us about. You guys were just using rewards.

It's just rewards. It makes everybody feel good. Again, it shifts from this internal learning that kids want to do to an external locus of control, which is the external bribe.

Like, what do I get if I do the thing instead of I'm going to be guided by my own curiosity? There's one more part of rewards that I spend a lot of time thinking about is when some people are getting rewards, other people aren't, which is punishing right in and of itself. And punishment creates fear. It doesn't create learning, and it disconnects kids when they need connections the most.

So the first aspect is that traditional tools, they fall very, very short of doing the things we think they are doing. So, Kristie, talk about brain science, because that's the second piece that I want to talk about, which is we've learned so much about the human brain since the 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s, when we just, many of us grew up. And there are new ways to do this.

Yeah, and I think that, you know, again, we have other podcasts and online courses that will go deep and wide. So if you're interested, just check out the show notes for this episode, and you'll have links to all of our other resources, because, you know, in 15 minutes, it's hard to go into all of the pieces and parts, especially if people are like, but this dojo system has worked for me, or I've got a kid you just don't understand, or it's not fair to the other students because it's so disruptive. I mean, there's so many elements to it.

And then, of course, Julie, we know people go all the way to kids who are either harming themselves or there's a threat of harming teachers or others. And so we understand all of that is in your context. But what Julie and I are really trying to whittle down from the brain research and brain science is that we want to understand that this is a stress response system.

So our bodies are this huge, complex network, especially our brains. And inside the brain, it's like an air traffic controller that's trying to tell us, you know, go a little higher, go a little lower, slow down, speed up, hold. And all of that's being said all at once.

And when you're an educator, you have all these humans in front of you that have their own air traffic control system going on. And it's a lot. But the things get activated so quickly and unbeknownst to even the human it's happening to.

So when we think about how do I respond, we may not understand that the outdated traditional tools that we're using are actually creating more of the behavioral response that we don't want in kids. So that's a long way to say that there is often a stress response to the current systems that we use trying to help kids stay regulated. Because I think our old fashioned motivation was to keep kids, I don't want to say controlled, but I do believe it in a lot of ways so that we felt in control.

Like it was for our nervous system, if that makes sense, Julie. Like I don't think I went out and thought, I want these preschoolers to get along and I want these preschoolers to do what I say for any more reason than I wanted to look like I was a good teacher and I wanted to feel like everybody was safe and learning.

Yeah.

And I think, right, that last piece that you said, safe and learning, it, yeah, sometimes people think the only way humans can feel safe or be learning is when it is a very quiet, controlled environment of which I am in control.

Correct. And I really like the idea of an air traffic controller, because what you don't realize if you have 32 students in front of you is there's 32 tiny air traffic controllers all managing their own, the systems of those students.

Yeah. And then sometimes the systems that we're using are actually causing red lights on the air traffic controllers. You know, they're just, it's really sending them over the edge.

I think one only needs to be a parent sitting around a table talking about a kid's day at school to realize how those systems can be so stressful because they'll, kids will come home and tell you who was on red, who was on blue, who was on green and why. And all of that is part of the dinnertime narrative because it's a stress story that they're sharing from their day. And I think, Julie, even for those who aren't parents, I think our own lived experiences we remember, we remember those things.

So let's, let's go to the download because this is where the solutions come in for this episode. And so for the last part of this, we're just going to orient you. So you're going to want to go to [inclusiveschooling.com/download 50](inclusiveschooling.com/download 50).

And what we're going to do is for anyone who's not yet looking at it, we're going to orient you to what's in the download and how you might use it. So this is again at [inclusiveschooling.com/download 50](inclusiveschooling.com/download 50). You'll also want to check out the show notes because we will make links to other podcasts where Julie and I have talked about issues around behavior.

As well as our online courses that will support you more wholly. So, Julie, the handout is kind of like, I don't know, two big sections. I guess the first one is a table that has some information and then there's a glossary.

So I'm going to start at the glossary and then let's go to the table where the solutions are. OK.

OK.

Sounds good. OK. So Julie and I have already used a lot of terms in this podcast.

And so you might want to check out the glossary just to make sure that we're on the same page or have a common understanding. We've given you phrases like behaviors, communication, consequences, co-regulation, internal motivation. Julie mentioned that a couple of times.

In a minute, we're going to talk about positive descriptive acknowledgement. We'll talk about positive reinforcement, praise, punishment. We mentioned negative reinforcement, you know, rewards, the whole gamut.

So just a quick definition. And then we've given you an example of what something like, let's say, praise will give you a definition. And then we'll give you

an example of what praise might look like if you're working with very young children in early childhood, in early elementary, in later elementary, in middle school, in high school.

So we're just trying to give it, regardless of what age group you work with, you can kind of see how that word or that outdated practice like praise would show up and look. You might go, I don't use praise. And then you might say, oh, well, we do that.

And so the question you might ask yourself is not how do I stop it, but how is it landing? And are there things that I could do that would be better?

Mm hmm. So, Kristie, since you used praise as the example, and I think that's a really good one where people will say, I don't, I don't really use praise because I know that there are challenges with it. Some examples are, I love how quietly you're sitting. Good job on your worksheet. Nice job being the first one done. You're such a good student. Way to get an A on your test.

Right. All of those are examples of praise.

Now you might be going, oh, OK, yeah, I do use praise often because I feel like it's a good way to connect to students. I feel like it's a good way for them to know what I think is the right move. And as Julie said earlier, and again, we're not saying these are good or bad, right? It depends on how it lands.

I'm using our plane analogy again, but how it lands on the nervous system of the person. And we got to think about it as sort of like this short term fix. And we always talk about behavior and regulation being a long term game.

So it might look in the moment that is helping. But over time, are kids going to be self motivated and curious or are they going to be looking for your approval? And then when somebody doesn't provide it, they start to question their own merit.

Mm hmm. So, Kristie, do you want me to go up to the chart at the top just to kind of...

Yeah, let's walk through the chart, which is a combination, folks, of these old-fashioned or outdated, I mean, they're not old-fashioned in the sense that we use them all the time, but they're old-fashioned in a way of our thinking about brain science.

And so the table is just a quick, you know, instead of doing this, try this and why it works and is a combination of this idea of moving away from praise and rewards and punishment.

Yeah, so I'll just use praise for the example. So instead of saying, good job, use a positive descriptive acknowledgment like, you worked hard to build that tower. Do you see the difference?

So instead of good job or beautiful tower or that's, you know, great work on that tower, you're saying you worked hard. Which is just acknowledging what the student did to accomplish the task.

And what that does is it builds an internal motivation and a bit of self-awareness, because at that moment, the kid can pause and say, oh, I did work hard on that tower. They can also say it was easy. I didn't work hard on the tower.

But the point is, all of that is allowing for a conversation instead of I'll tell you my evaluation of this thing.

Right. Yeah.

Yeah. So here's another one. Ignoring big feelings because they'll get over it.

So that's. Something that often happens is people and again, we're going to link to some other podcasts that go into deep conversation about planned ignoring. But even if it's just kind of like, "Ah, they'll get over it, It's not that big of a deal." can do real harm to a person that's like, that was a big deal to me. It's not, you know, it's not, you know, when Julie asks me how things are, if something upsets me, she doesn't then tell me, oh, Kristie, that's not a big deal.

You shouldn't be upset about that. She'll do something that is compassionate or she'll do something that's empathy or she'll validate my emotions. So in this case, if I'm an educator and I think, ah, they'll get over it, instead, I want to try to validate the emotions. It looks like you're frustrated. I'm here to help.

It doesn't matter if I think they should be frustrated. If I think it's over the top of an emotion for the situation, it's just like it looks like you're frustrated. I'm here to help.

And so this is really, it's kind of like Julie just said about self-awareness. It's allowing the student to understand how they might feel and they can use emotional literacy. So just like when she said, oh, it wasn't that hard at all to build.

That's still great. They're not telling you you're an idiot for thinking it was. Or if they go, well, I'm not frustrated, I'm just kind of annoyed.

It's just building that literacy and that understanding, that self-awareness, and it builds trust with you. So when it is a big deal, they know that you'll be there in that moment. I love that.

You want to pick one more, J.C.?

Yeah. Taking away recess as a punishment. I bet you everyone listening is like, ugh, everyone's like, no, of course not.

But instead of doing something like that, you would use co-regulation strategies to help students reset. So instead of adding a punishment, giving a consequence, taking something away, you instead are supportive in the moment and you help to co-regulate that student. Because as we well know, the human brain is not fully developed until age 25-ish and no students in our public schools are able to self-regulate.

So we have to be the ones to co-regulate instead of add a consequence or a punishment at the end. What we're doing when we do that is we're supporting emotional regulation instead of increasing stress by taking something away.

Yeah, so here's here's your task or your invitation or your challenge, OK, friends, whichever one makes your nervous system feel creative and ready.

If you're ready to make a shift, you want to go to [inclusiveschooling.com/download 50](inclusiveschooling.com/download50). You look at the table that Julie and I have just been walking you through. You'll choose one that you do or a variation of one that you've seen and you're going to swap it out this week and then you're just going to notice what happens.

And so every time we move from trying to control the behavior to really connecting to the human that's behind that behavior, we're really building stronger brains, stronger relationships, and really stronger communities. So share this handout with a colleague who's ready to rethink behavior supports along with you.

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## SHOW NOTES

In this milestone 50th episode, Dr. Julie Causton and Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak challenge long-held beliefs about praise, rewards, and punishment in our classrooms. They unpack common myths— like "they're just doing it for attention"— and invite us to shift from control-based strategies to connection-centered support.

This episode is for every educator who has ever been told to "just use consequences" or wonders whether sticker charts, clip systems, and gold stars are actually helping students grow. (Spoiler alert: They aren't.)

Julie and Kristie walk you through three foundational ideas:

- Why old behavior tools often backfire;

- What brain science tells us about regulation and motivation;

- And how to shift toward strategies that truly support inclusive classrooms.


And the best part? You'll walk away with a powerful download that gives you 10 practical swaps you can make right away— backed by brain science and grounded in connection.

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### Episode Download: 10 Inclusive Swaps

Use this practical handout to reflect on your current behavior tools and explore more inclusive approaches.

📥 Get the handout at [inclusiveschooling.com/download 50](inclusiveschooling.com/download 50).

Inside, you'll find:

- 10 clear "Instead of… Try this…" swaps with rationale and examples across grade levels

- A glossary of common behavior terms explained through an inclusive lens

- Specific strategies for supporting internal motivation, co-regulation, and relationship

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**Key Takeaways**

- **Old tools fall short**: Praise, rewards, and punishment may feel effective in the moment, but they often undermine trust and internal motivation.

- **Behavior is communication**: When students are dysregulated or disengaged, the goal is to connect— not control.

- **Every tool teaches something**: Public charts and external incentives often teach compliance. Inclusive tools teach self-awareness, emotional literacy, and responsibility.

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**Practical Tips**

- Swap "Good job!" for a positive descriptive acknowledgment like, "You worked hard to build that tower."

- Replace sticker charts with acknowledgment circles or relational check-ins.

- Skip the punishment and co-regulate with students through breathing, proximity, or quiet reflection.

- Use reflective questions instead of imposed consequences: "What happened? How can we make it right?"