

Rewards in Early Childhood Classroom: Short-Term Gains, Long-Term Costs?

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Abstract.

The use of rewards as a motivational strategy has long been applied in education, but its effectiveness and impact on children's intrinsic motivation are still crucial debates. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the meaning of rewards in increasing early childhood learning motivation in Islamic Kindergartens, and to understand its implications for educational practices. Initial observations at *TK Anak Islam* indicate the existence of diverse reward-giving practices, but an in-depth understanding of children's perceptions and the effectiveness of rewards in triggering sustainable motivation is still limited. The method used in this study was qualitative-descriptive, with the aim of understanding how rewards are interpreted and how they influence learning motivation in early childhood. The study was conducted at *TK Anak Islam*, which implements a reward-based learning system to increase learning motivation in early childhood. The results of the study identified four main types of rewards: material (stickers, stationery), social (verbal praise, applause), activity/privilege (opportunity to choose, additional playtime), and symbolic (achievement cards, star boards). Verbal praise is the form most often used and considered effective by teachers. Research recommendations emphasize the importance of reward variation, consistency, timely delivery, and a focus on the child's effort process in reward-giving strategies.

Keywords: *Reward, Learning Motivation, Early Childhood*

Abstrak.

Penggunaan *reward* sebagai strategi motivasi telah lama diterapkan dalam pendidikan, namun efektivitasnya dan dampaknya terhadap motivasi intrinsik anak-anak masih menjadi perdebatan yang penting. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis makna *reward* dalam meningkatkan motivasi belajar pada anak usia dini di TK Anak Islam, serta memahami implikasinya bagi praktik pendidikan. Pengamatan awal di TK Anak Islam menunjukkan adanya praktik pemberian *reward* yang beragam, namun pemahaman mendalam tentang persepsi anak-anak dan efektivitas *reward* dalam memicu motivasi yang berkelanjutan masih terbatas. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah kualitatif-deskriptif, dengan tujuan memahami bagaimana *reward* diinterpretasikan dan bagaimana pengaruhnya terhadap motivasi belajar pada anak usia dini. Penelitian ini dilakukan di Taman Kanak-Kanak Anak Islam, yang

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<https://doi.org/10.47766/seulanga.v6i2.6362>

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menerapkan sistem pembelajaran berbasis *reward* untuk meningkatkan motivasi belajar pada anak usia dini. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi empat jenis *reward* utama: material (stiker, alat tulis), sosial (pujian verbal, tepuk tangan), aktivitas/privilese (kesempatan memilih, waktu bermain tambahan), dan simbolis (kartu prestasi, papan bintang). Pujian verbal adalah bentuk yang paling sering digunakan dan dianggap efektif oleh guru. Rekomendasi penelitian menekankan pentingnya variasi *reward*, konsistensi, waktu pemberian yang tepat, dan fokus pada proses usaha anak dalam strategi pemberian reward.

Kata Kunci: *Reward, Motivasi Belajar, Anak Usia Dini*

Introduction

Early childhood education is a crucial stage in shaping children's personalities and learning potential (Iqbal et al., 2023). During this period, children are in their “golden age,” characterized by a high level of curiosity and enthusiasm for exploration (Piaget, 1969). Therefore, fostering high learning motivation is vital for children to actively participate, dare to try new things, and persevere in facing challenges, which will directly affect their readiness for the next level of education. If motivation is not properly nurtured, children risk becoming passive, easily bored, and losing initiative, thereby hindering the achievement of their optimal potential.

In order to increase children's motivation to learn, the practice of giving rewards has long been a common strategy used in various educational institutions, including early childhood education. Educators and poften intuitively give rewards in various forms, ranging from verbal praise, stickers, to small gifts, in response to children's positive behavior or success in completing tasks (Zurriyati et al., 2023; Ilham et al., 2023; Suwanto & Rahman, 2022; Veryawan & Mawarni, 2025; Oktaviana et al., 2025). However, behind this common practice, there is an important discussion and debate about the effectiveness and meaning of long-term rewards, particularly regarding their impact on children's intrinsic motivation (Kohn, 1993; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Concerns have been raised that over-reliance on external rewards may lead to a decline in children's internal drive to learn for their own personal satisfaction.

Learning motivation is a crucial foundation in the early childhood education learning process. At this stage, children are in a golden age of development where curiosity and enthusiasm for exploration are very high (Piaget, 1969). High motivation will encourage children to actively participate, experiment, and overcome challenges in learning, which in turn will affect their readiness for the next level of education. Without sufficient motivation, children tend to be passive, easily bored, and lack initiative, thereby hindering the achievement of their full potential (Asirah et al., 2023).

Among the various strategies for cultivating motivation, the use of rewards has long been a common practice in education, including in early childhood education settings. Intuitively, educators frequently give rewards in the form of praise, stickers, or small gifts in response to children's positive behavior or success in tasks. However, the effectiveness and meaning of these rewards need to be examined more deeply, given the debate regarding their long-term impact on children's intrinsic motivation (Kohn, 1993; Deci & Ryan, 1985). There is a concern that dependence on external rewards may reduce children's interest in learning for their own satisfaction.

An effective early childhood education approach emphasizes the importance of creating a conducive environment that allows children to develop their motor, cognitive, and social skills well. According to Ariyati (2016:1), children in an experience-rich environment show that they develop reinforcement, imitation, and experimentation in learning activities well because they learn through previous experiences.

Rewards, as explained by Andriani as cited in Ningsih (2020), are joyful gifts given to students as recognition of their success in achieving good learning outcomes. According to Hamid as cited in (Ningsih, 2020), rewards are a form of appreciation in the form of something enjoyable to encourage children to be enthusiastic about learning, especially for children who tend to be lazy, so that they are more motivated when learning.

According to Hamalik as cited in Atikah (2018), rewards are a form of reinforcement used to foster children's enthusiasm. Rewards serve as a driving

force for children's motivation to learn so that they are more enthusiastic about learning. The application of enjoyable and appropriate rewards can create a learning atmosphere that motivates, encourages, and supports children's development in a good and comprehensive manner. High learning motivation greatly influences children's future success. Children who have high enthusiasm for learning tend to be active, confident, and able to develop their potential optimally (Siti Saharia, Rivo Panji Yudha 2023). Children's learning motivation is a series of efforts to create an atmosphere that makes children want to do something. Sardiman (2011) defines motivation as a series of efforts to create pleasant conditions so that children are willing and want to do something. Motivation is not just a mere encouragement but needs to involve supportive conditions and environments.

Therefore, based on the aforementioned background, this study aims to analyze the meaning of rewards in increasing early childhood learning motivation. Specifically, this study will identify the types and forms of rewards applied, explore early childhood perceptions of rewards, and analyze the role and meaning of these rewards in triggering their learning motivation. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide a more comprehensive understanding and practical implications for educators to optimize the use of rewards as a constructive tool in developing the learning motivation of early childhood.

Methodology

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative, with the aim of describing and understanding an event based on perspectives and experiences. In this case, the researchers sought to determine how rewards are interpreted and influence the motivation to learn in early childhood. This study was conducted at an Islamic kindergarten that implements a reward-based learning system to increase the motivation to learn in early childhood.

The subjects in this study involved classroom teachers, early childhood children (4–6 years old) as reward recipients, and parents as supporting parties regarding the influence of rewards on children's enthusiasm for learning. To obtain data, the researcher used three data collection techniques, namely direct observation to observe

how teachers gave rewards and the children's involvement in the learning process and when receiving rewards; interviews with teachers and parents to understand their views on the role of rewards in increasing children's learning motivation; and documentation in the form of children's work, photos of activities, teacher notes, and learning schedules as supporting evidence.

Findings and Discussions

Rewards in the education system are a strategy to encourage children to be motivated in achieving their learning goals and to encourage them to demonstrate their best capabilities (Purwanto, 2015). Appropriate rewards could boost children's self-confidence, keep them active, and create a positive learning environment (Azzarah, 2024). Rewards are not only material, but can also be in the form of praise, recognition, Rewards can also take the form of opportunities given to children to develop their interests and provide enjoyable learning experiences. However, inappropriate rewards may have a negative impact on children. If they become too dependent on rewards, children will get used to learning only to get rewards, and gradually lose their interest in learning. This situation could also cause unnecessary competition between children and could make them stressed. Therefore, teachers must be wise in using rewards, paying attention to the characteristics of children, and balancing rewards with the child's intrinsic motivation to learn so that rewards function as a good motivational tool and not as a source of pressure on children.

According to Arikunto (2012), rewards are a system of recognition for individuals in the form of acknowledgment for their achievements. Giving rewards not only serves as a form of appreciation for achievements but also as a form of recognition for achieving targets. In the world of education, rewards are used to encourage children's motivation to learn. With rewards, children will usually try harder and feel appreciated, so they are motivated to improve and maintain their abilities. In a similar vein, Maria J. Wantah (2005) argue that giving rewards to early childhood has a positive impact on their development. Giving rewards makes children feel satisfied and more enthusiastic about maintaining and encouraging good behaviour (Sari et al., 2024). An effectively implemented reward system can also shape positive character and behavior in early childhood. Rewards for expected behavior will increase a child's sense of responsibility, self-confidence, and pride, so that the child becomes more motivated to do other good deeds.

Furthermore, According to Rahmawaty Alkatiri (2023), there are several advantages to giving rewards to early childhood. First, rewards may increase motivation and enthusiasm for learning so that children are more diligent and encouraged to try new things and continue to develop. In addition, rewards also strengthen the relationship between educators and children, because when children receive praise or proud looks from educators, they feel safe, appreciated, and become more confident so that they feel comfortable developing their abilities. The form of reward given to children must be enjoyable, such as praise, toys, stickers, or extra play time, because enjoyable rewards will foster a sense of joy so that they become activities that children always look forward to. Giving rewards is also an appropriate incentive for early childhood, because when children see their friends receiving rewards, they may want to try it themselves, motivating them to do good things in order to receive rewards as well.

Meanwhile, the disadvantage of giving rewards to early childhood is that it can be a challenge for educators because it requires a special budget to provide gifts, praise, and other facilities, especially if rewards are given regularly. In addition, for some children who lack of confidence, the reward might have a potential to cause psychological pressure, because children feel burdened when they have to show their abilities in front of others, and it can even trigger unhealthy competition just to get rewards. Therefore, educators must be wise in implementing it so that rewards truly become motivators, not an added burden on children. On the other hand, educators often focus more on children who are active, intelligent, and easy to interact with, so that children who tend to be quiet, even though they have a good understanding, feel that they do not have the opportunity to actively participate in demonstrating their abilities. As a result, the learning process becomes less than ideal because it is not really comprehensive.

Learning motivation in early childhood varies; some children appear very enthusiastic about learning, while others seem uninterested even when a reward system is implemented. This shows that rewards are not fully effective in motivating children. However, motivation is very important in encouraging children's learning process. Motivation itself is influenced by two main factors, namely internal factors in the form of internal drives such as interest, curiosity, and the desire to do something; and external factors that originate from outside the child, such as the way teachers teach, family

support, and interaction with peers (Esi, Lidia, & Mardeli, 2023). According to Purwanto in Thobroni (2015), motivation is the most important element that influences the learning process of early childhood, even like a driving force within an individual that encourages a person to take action, so that when children understand that what they are learning is important and useful, learning will be more meaningful. Based on the observations conducted, the researcher identified that there are various types of rewards used by teachers in early childhood learning, both material and non-material rewards.

Table 1. Types and forms of rewards implemented

No	Types of reward	Forms of reward	Examples of reward
1	Materials	Star stickers, colored pencils, cute stamps, candy/chocolate.	Given after the child successfully completes a task (coloring neatly) or demonstrates positive behavior (being brave to come forward).
2	Social (praise/affirmation)	Verbal praise ("very good," "great"), applause, thumbs up, smiles	Used regularly when the child responds to questions, shares their toys, or shows effort.
3	Activities/Privileges	The opportunity to be the "leader of the group," choosing songs, going first in a certain area, extra playing time	Given as a reward for cooperative behavior, faster task completion, or initiative.

The analysis shows that verbal praise (social rewards) is the most commonly used form, followed by simple material rewards such as stickers. Teachers stated that "children are happiest when they are praised; their faces immediately light up and they are enthusiastic again the next day."

Researchers explored how young children perceive the rewards they receive, and in general, children showed positive responses, especially to material and immediate rewards. Enthusiasm and excitement are evident when children receive stickers or praise, as shown through cheerful expressions and broad smiles. Some children even show a desire to repeat the same behavior in order to obtain more rewards. For example, children who are praised for tidying up their toys tend to be more active in doing so the next time they have the opportunity. In addition, children begin to understand the relationship between behavior and rewards, leading to an initial understanding of cause and effect. However, there is also a tendency for children to make social comparisons, such as comparing the number of stickers with their friends, which in some cases can lead to positive competition or jealousy.

Based on observations and interviews, rewards play a role in increasing the learning motivation of early childhood even though the effects vary from child to child.

Rewards, whether material or social, are effective in attracting children's attention at the beginning of learning so that they are more focused when receiving instructions. Children also show more effort to complete tasks, even challenging ones, for the chance to earn rewards. In addition to reinforcing positive behaviors such as sharing, taking turns, and focusing on learning, rewards also help build children's self-confidence. Praise and recognition from teachers make children feel appreciated for their efforts, as expressed by one child who said, "I'm happy when the teacher says I'm great" (Observation, 2024).

This section interprets the above findings, relates them to motivation theories, and discusses their implications for the practice of rewarding early childhood education.

The research findings confirm that rewards, in various forms (material, social, activities, symbolic), serve as extrinsic motivators for early childhood. This is very consistent with B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning theory, which states that behaviors followed by pleasant consequences (positive reinforcement/rewards) are likely to be repeated in the future (Skinner, 1953). The children at TK Anak Islam showed increased engagement and effort in completing tasks because of the expectation of rewards, such as stickers or praise. Teachers intuitively used this principle to shape desired behavior.

Verbal praise (social reward) is a very effective form of reward because it provides immediate positive feedback and builds an emotional connection between the teacher and the child. This is in line with Dweck's (2006) view on the importance of process-oriented praise (e.g., praising effort) rather than just results, which can foster a growth mindset in children.

Although extrinsic rewards are effective in the beginning, research in educational psychology emphasizes the importance of transitioning to intrinsic motivation, which is the desire to learn for internal satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In early childhood, rewards can serve as a bridge. For example, rewards in the form of play opportunities (activities/privileges) that children enjoy can foster internal interest in the learning process itself, not just the reward.

However, findings of social comparison and potential jealousy among children show that excessive or unfair material rewards can erode intrinsic motivation and foster unhealthy competition (Kohn, 1993). This underscores the need for balance and variety in the types of rewards. Teachers need to focus rewards on children's efforts and self-improvement, not just on the end result or comparison with other friends (Santrock, 2018).

For young children, the meaning of rewards is often simpler and more concrete. Stickers or candy have clear and easily understood value as a form of recognition for positive behavior. Praise from trusted adults also provides strong emotional validation.

However, the meaning of rewards is also related to children's basic psychological needs. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) states that individuals have an innate need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Rewards are linked to several aspects of children's motivational development, including competence, connectedness, and autonomy (Sigalingging et al., 2023; Michaelsen & Esch, 2023). When children receive rewards for successfully completing a task, it reinforces their sense of competence, for example when a teacher says, "Great, you can put the blocks together yourself!". In addition, praise from teachers also strengthens the positive relationship between children and teachers, thereby fulfilling their need for connectedness. On the other hand, rewards in the form of opportunities to choose activities can stimulate a sense of autonomy in children, although this still needs to be developed through providing more varied choices in the learning process.

The implication is that rewards must be meaningful, focus on the process and effort, and be varied so that they are not monotonous and lose their motivational value. The use of symbolic rewards such as star charts is also effective because they provide continuous recognition and can be displayed (Ormrod, 2018).

This study also identified challenges in giving rewards, where teachers need to have specific skills to apply them effectively. Teachers must be able to provide a variety of rewards so that children do not easily get bored and so that the effectiveness of the rewards can be maintained (Munafiah et al., 2023). In addition, consistency in giving rewards is very important so that children understand the behavioral expectations of them. Rewards also need to be given in a timely manner, immediately after the desired behavior occurs, because rewards given directly have a greater reinforcing effect (Slavin, 2018). Furthermore, teachers need to emphasize rewards not only on the end result, but also on the process and effort of children, because praising effort can foster perseverance and build a growth mindset in early childhood.

The practical implication for early childhood teachers is that rewards are a powerful tool, but they must be used wisely. Teachers are advised to prioritize social and symbolic rewards, reduce dependence on material rewards, and gradually help children find intrinsic satisfaction from the learning process itself. Teacher training on a variety of positive motivation strategies is essential (OECD, 2017).

This study found several significant similarities with previous studies on rewards and learning motivation in early childhood. The finding that extrinsic rewards—especially material and social rewards—are effective in increasing initial engagement and encouraging task completion in early childhood is consistent with Skinner's (1953) principle of operant conditioning. Many studies in educational psychology also confirm that positive reinforcement can shape and maintain desired behavior in children (Slavin, 2018). This shows that rewards can be an initial stimulus that triggers learning actions.

In addition, this study shows that verbal praise is the most frequently used form of reward and is considered effective by teachers (Drake, & Nelson, 2021). These findings are in line with the literature that emphasizes the power of praise—especially process-oriented praise—in building a growth mindset and generating internal motivation in children (Dweck, 2006; Ormrod, 2018). Praise also provides informative feedback and strengthens the positive relationship between teachers and children (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). Rewards also play a role in building self-confidence, because when children feel appreciated for their efforts, their positive self-concept becomes stronger, which then influences their motivation and learning success (Santrock, 2018).

Furthermore, the conclusion that the meaning of rewards for young children is not limited to material value, but is also related to the fulfillment of basic psychological needs—such as competence and connectedness—is in line with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) from Deci and Ryan (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many studies based on SDT have also found that rewards that support autonomy and competence have a stronger effect in fostering intrinsic motivation. However, this study also found certain differences when compared to previous studies, one of which is the focus on children's direct perceptions, not just through teachers' interpretations or behavioral observations. This study explicitly explored children's verbal responses and emotional expressions when receiving rewards.

Finally, this study provides a more in-depth picture of the dynamics of social comparison that occur in the classroom as a result of giving rewards. This study not only discusses the positive effects, but also shows how social comparison can trigger jealousy or frustration in some children. In addition, this study contextualizes the practice of rewards specifically in the environment of Islamic Kindergartens, so that it is able to capture the nuances of implementation, the types of rewards used, and the real challenges that arise in the local context. The analysis of this study is also integrated with

a review of the availability of rewards and their implications for learning motivation, including the potential for the overjustification effect (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973), if material rewards are given too dominantly.

Overall, although this study confirms many basic principles about the effectiveness of rewards in early childhood that have been found in the literature, it also makes a significant contribution through a deeper understanding of children's perceptions, complex social dynamics, and the contextualization of reward practices in specific early childhood education settings. This enriches the body of knowledge on how rewards can be maximized to foster positive and sustainable learning motivation in early childhood.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively examines the meaning and role of rewards in increasing the learning motivation of early childhood students at the Al-Huda Education Foundation. The findings show that rewards come in various forms, including material, social (praise), activities/privileges, and symbolic, with verbal praise being the most dominant form. Children respond to rewards with enthusiasm, a desire to repeat positive behaviors, and an early understanding of the consequences of their actions, although there are indications of social comparison.

Fundamentally, rewards function as effective extrinsic motivators, in line with Skinner's operant conditioning theory, which encourages initial engagement and task completion. However, the discussion also emphasizes the urgency of transitioning to intrinsic motivation, where rewards must be given wisely so as not to erode children's internal interest. The meaning of rewards for young children is not limited to the value of objects, but is also closely related to the fulfillment of basic psychological needs such as competence and connectedness (Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory).

The implications of this study underscore the importance of reward strategies that are varied, consistent, timely, and focused on the child's process and effort. Practical recommendations for educators are to prioritize social and symbolic rewards, reduce dependence on material rewards, and gradually cultivate children's intrinsic satisfaction in learning. This approach will ensure that rewards truly function as effective tools to develop early childhood learning motivation in a positive and sustainable manner.

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