Several days later, the children were brought back into the laboratory and were given the opportunity to play with a number of attractive toys, including the felt-tip markers. No rewards were mentioned or administered during this phase of the experiment. To measure intrinsic interest, the researchers noted the amount of time the children spent playing with the markers during this free period. Consistent with the claim that external rewards can dampen intrinsic motivation, the data shown in Figure 5.7 reveal that the children in the expected-reward condition spent less time playing with the markers during the second stage of the experiment than did children in the other two conditions (for related research, see Boggiano & Main, 1986; Higgins, Lee, Kwon, & Trope, 1995). One explanation for this finding is that the reward undermined the children’s interest through a self-perception process. The reward led children to discount the extent to which their original behavior (playing with the markers) was due to their intrinsic interest.

Fortunately, external rewards do not always undermine intrinsic motivation. Deci (1975) noted that external rewards contain two components. On the one hand, they can function as a bribe and reduce freedom by coercing people to behave in ways they normally would not. On the other hand, they can provide important information about the quality of one’s efforts and accomplishments (as when a person receives a reward for trying hard or for turning in an exemplary performance). Rewards appear to undermine intrinsic interest only when the controlling aspect of the reward is more prominent than its informational value (Ryan, Mims, & Koestner, 1983). This means that rewarding someone for a job well done does not necessarily diminish the person’s enthusiasm for performing the task (R. Eisenberger, Armeli, & Pretz, 1998;