Constructive Classroom Rewards:

Promoting Good Habits While Protecting Children's Health

Rewarding children in the classroom need not involve candy and other foods that can undermine children's diets and health and reinforce unhealthful eating habits. A wide variety of alternative rewards can be used to provide positive reinforcement for children's behavior and academic performance.

"It's just a little treat": the harm in using food to reward children

Schools should not only teach children how to make healthy choices and to eat to fulfill nutritional needs, but also should provide an environment that fosters healthy eating. Providing food based on performance or behavior connects food to mood. This practice can encourage children to eat treats even when they are not hungry and can instill lifetime habits of rewarding or comforting themselves with food behaviors associated with unhealthy eating or obesity. Awarding children food during class also reinforces eating outside of meal or snack times.

Since few studies have been conducted on the effect of using food rewards on children's long-term eating habits, **the best policy is not to use food to reward children for good behavior or academic performance. At a minimum, children should not be rewarded using foods of poor nutritional quality.** (Note: for more information on classroom parties, see http://bit.ly/schoolparties.)

The value of rewarding children (with non-food rewards)

As teachers know, classroom rewards can be an effective way to encourage positive behavior. Children, like everyone, alter their actions based on short-term anticipated consequences. When trying to foster a new behavior, it is important to reward a child consistently each time he/she does the desired behavior.

Once the behavior has become an established habit, rewards can be given every now and then to encourage the child to maintain the preferred behavior.

The ultimate goal of rewarding children is to help them internalize positive behaviors so that they will not need a reward. Eventually, self-motivation will be sufficient to induce them to perform the desired behavior, and outside reinforcement will no longer be necessary.

Physical activity and food should not be linked to punishment

Punishing children by taking away recess or physical education classes reduces their already-scarce opportunities for physical activity (for alternative ideas, see http://bit.ly/activityalternatives). Another counter-productive punishment is forcing children to do physical activity such as running laps or pushups.

Children often learn to dislike things that are used as punishments. Thus, penalizing children with physical activity might lead them to avoid activities that are important for maintaining wellness and a healthy body weight. In addition, food should not be withheld as a means of punishing children.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture prohibits withholding meals as a punishment for any child enrolled in a school participating in the school meal programs.[1]

Examples of beneficial (and inexpensive) rewards for children[2]

❖ Social rewards

"Social rewards," which involve attention, praise, or thanks, are often more highly valued by children than a toy or food. Simple gestures like pats on the shoulder, verbal praise (including in front of others), nods, or smiles can mean a lot. These types of social rewards affirm a child's worth as a person.

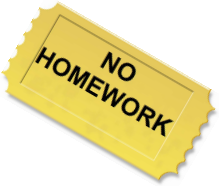
❖ Recognition

- Trophy, plaque, ribbon, or certificate in recognition of achievement or a sticker with an affirming message (*e.g.,* "Great job")
- Recognizing a child's achievement on the school-wide morning announcements and/or the school's website
- A photo recognition board in a prominent location in the school
- A phone call, email, or letter sent home to parents or guardians commending a child's accomplishment
- A note from the teacher to the student commending his/her achievement

1 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). *Prohibition against Denying Meals and Milk to Children as a Disciplinary Action*. Alexandria, VA: USDA, 1988.
2 Some examples adapted from "Alternatives to Using Food as a Reward," Michigan Team Nutrition (a partnership between the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan State University Extension), 2004. Accessed at <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/hsmrs/Michigan/foodrewards.pdf> on June 1, 2016.

❖ Privileges

- Going first
- Sitting by friends or in a special seat next to or at the teacher's desk
- Having an extra few minutes of recess with a friend
- Listening with a headset to an e-book
- Helping the teacher
- "No homework" pass



- Teaching the class
- Playing an educational computer or other game
- Reading to a younger class
- Making deliveries to the office
- Reading the school-wide morning announcements
- Helping in another classroom
- Choosing a class activity
- Eating lunch with a teacher or principal
- Going to the library to select a book to read
- Taking a walk with the principal or teacher
- Designing a class or hall bulletin board
- Writing or drawing on the blackboard/whiteboard
- Taking care of the class animal for a day
- Allowing a child to choose an extra recess activity for the class on his/her birthday

❖ Rewards for a class

- Extra recess
- Eating lunch outdoors
- Going to the lunchroom first
- Reading outdoors
- Holding class outdoors
- Extra art, music, PE, or reading time

- A field trip
- A song, dance, or performance by the teacher or students
- A book read aloud to the class by the teacher
- Free choice" time at the end of the day
- Listening to music while working
- Dancing to music
- Playing a game or doing a puzzle together

❖ School supplies

- Pencils: colored, with logos, or other decorations
- Pens
- Erasers
- Notepads/notebooks, folders
- Boxes of crayons
- Chalk (e.g., sidewalk chalk)
- Rulers
- Glitter
- Pencil sharpeners, grips, or boxes
- Stamps
- Plastic scissors
- Bookmarks
- Highlighters
- Stencils
- Markers
- Coloring books or downloaded pages
- Gift certificate to the school store

❖ Toys/trinkets

- Stickers
- Small dolls or action figures
- Rubber balls
- Finger puppets
- Stuffed animals
- Plastic or rubber figurines
- Toy cars, trucks, helicopters, or airplanes
- Plastic sliding puzzles or other puzzle games
- Slinkies
- Gliders
- Magnifying glasses
- Bubble fluid with wand
- Capsules that become sponges/figurines when placed in water
- Spinning tops
- Marbles
- Jacks
- Playing cards
- Silly putty
- Balloons
- Inflatable toys (balls, animals)
- Yo-yos

❖ Sports equipment and athletic gear

- Paddleballs
- Frisbees
- Water bottles
- NERF Balls
- Hula hoop
- Jump rope
- Head and wrist sweat bands

❖ Fashion wear

- Temporary tattoos
- Hair accessories (barrettes, elastics, or ribbons)
- Bracelets, rings, necklaces
- Sunglasses
- Eyeglasses with nose disguise
- Hat or cap
- T-shirt
- Sneaker bumper stickers
- Shoe laces

❖ Miscellaneous

- Books
- Key chains
- Cups
- Magnets

- Backscratchers
- A plant, or seeds and pot for growing a plant
- Crazy straws

- **A token or point system**, whereby children earn points that accumulate toward a bigger prize. Possible prizes include those listed above and:

  - Gift certificate to a bookstore or sporting goods store
  - Movie pass or rental gift certificate
  - Ticket to sporting event
  - Puzzle
  - Book
  - Stuffed animal
  - Magazine subscription
  - Board game
  - Step counter (pedometer)
  - Sports equipment, such as a tennis racket, baseball glove, soccer ball, or basketball

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Children can be given fake money, tokens, stars, or a chart can be used to keep track of the points they have earned. Points can be exchanged for privileges or prizes when enough are accumulated.

A point system also may be used for an entire class to earn a reward. Whenever individual children have done well, poitns can be added to the entire class's "account." When the class has earned a target number of points, then they receive a group reward.

For more information, contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org.

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