

Non-Food Rewards for Kids

There is currently a childhood obesity epidemic. Over 16 percent of children are overweight. Over the past four decades, childhood obesity rates have increased three- to fourfold, with even higher rates among minority and economically disadvantaged children and adolescents.

Today many kids are overwhelmed with sugary food choices. This increases their chances of obesity and a future of serious health problems once seen almost exclusively in adults, including Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, sleep apnea, and orthopedic problems.

At home, school, and throughout the community kids are offered food as a reward for "good" behavior. Food is an inexpensive, easy choice that can cause immediate short-term behavior changes.

These food rewards are typically "empty calorie" foods-high in fat, sugar and salt with little nutritional value. They provide extra calories and replace healthier food choices.

Using food rewards teaches kids to eat when they aren't hungry and can cause them to develop life-long habits of rewarding or comforting themselves with unhealthy foods. They also may tie food to emotions, such as feelings of accomplishment. "I did a good job, so I deserve to treat myself to a piece of double chocolate cake."

Kids view certain foods that are used as rewards to be better or more valuable than other foods. As a result, they learn to prefer unhealthy foods that are given to them as rewards (e.g. candy, cookies and soft drinks) over healthy foods (e.g. vegetables, fruits, milk and dairy products).

Rewarding or punishing kids with food can lead to eating disorders. Withholding food for punishment may stimulate kids to overeat when food is available, because they are afraid they won't have enough to eat later.

Kids naturally enjoy eating healthy and being physically active. Parents, schools and communities should provide kids with an environment that supports healthy behaviors and teaches them lifelong healthy eating habits.

At Home

Parents can provide non-food rewards at home. Respect and words of appreciation can go a long way. Saying "You did a great job" or "I appreciate your help" is often underestimated. Simply recognizing kids for good work or behavior is a great motivator and is always appreciated.

Here are other ways to reward a child's good behavior and academic excellence while generating fun and great results:

- Allow your child to have a few friends over after school to play sports or watch a video.
- Invite a few of their friends to a sleepover.
- Let the child help plan a special outing.
- Read a bedtime story of your child's choice.
- Have a family game night, and let the child choose the game(s).
- Allow the child to pick a movie that the family will watch together or an outdoor sport that the family will play together.
- Keep a box of special toys, computer games or art supplies that can only be used on special occasions.
- Set up a system so that the child can earn movie tickets, coupons, gift certificates or

discounts to skating rinks, bowling alleys, and other entertainment outlets.

At School

Food is commonly used to reward students for good behavior and academic excellence. It brings about an immediate behavior change in kids.

If this food reward system is working, then why does it need to be changed? In addition to the many reasons already mentioned, giving students food rewards during class reinforces the bad habit of eating outside of meal or snack times.

Rewarding kids with food also can contribute to obesity, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and other health problems. Non-food items or activities, on the other hand, can support good health while recognizing kids for their achievements or good behavior.

Here are some non-food alternatives that students can enjoy as rewards at school.

Zero-Cost Alternatives:

- sit by friends
- watch a video
- read outdoors
- teach the class
- earn extra credit
- get extra art time
- have an extra recess
- receive verbal praise
- enjoy class outdoors
- play a computer game
- read to a younger class
- go on a walking field trip
- get a "no homework" pass
- make deliveries to the office
- take care of the class animal
- listen to music while working
- read morning announcements
- play a favorite game or puzzle
- be a helper in another classroom
- eat lunch outdoors with the class
- walk with a teacher during lunch
- eat lunch with a teacher or principal
- design a class/school bulletin board
- be recognized during announcements
- be featured on a photo recognition board

- dance to favorite music in the classroom
- earn play money to be used for privileges
- get "free choice" time at the end of the day
- listen with a headset to a book on audiotape
- have teacher share a special skill (e.g. sing)
- receive a note of recognition from the teacher or principal
- go to the library to select a book to read
- have a teacher read a special book to the entire class
- receive a 5-minute chat break at the end of the class or at the end of the day
- earn points for good behavior to "buy" unique rewards (e.g. autographed items with special meaning or lunch with the teacher)

Low-Cost Alternatives:

- select a paper back book
- enter a drawing for donated prizes among students who meet certain grade standards
- earn a trophy, plaque, ribbon or certificate
- get a video store or movie theatre coupon
- earn a pass to the zoo, aquarium, or museum
- earn a free pass to a school event or game
- get a flash cards set printed from a computer
- receive a "mystery pack" (gift-wrapped items such as a notepad, folder, puzzle, sports cards, etc.)
- earn a gift certificate to the school store or book fair
- receive a plant, seeds and a pot for growing
- earn an item such as a Frisbee, hula hoop, jump rope, paddleball or sidewalk chalk, which promote physical activity
- take a trip to the treasure box (non-food items such as water bottles, stickers, key chains, temporary tattoos, yo-yo's, bubbles, spider rings, charms and pencil toppers)
- receive art supplies, coloring books, glitter, bookmarks, rulers, stencils, stamps, pens, pencils, erasers and other school supplies

These ideas are just a beginning and can be modified for different age levels. Options for non-food rewards are limited only by imagination, time, and resources.

Always match the reward with the action. For completing reading assignments, give a book, magazine, or word-play activity. When a class

project is successfully completed, reward the child with a pencil or eraser. Allow extra time to play outside if the class behaves well.

Classroom nutrition education is meaningless if contradicted by rewarding kids with candy, soft drinks and other sweets. The classroom message is that kids need to eat healthy foods to feel good and learn better. However, when they behave well or perform their best, kids are rewarded with unhealthy food, like candy and cookies.

Marlene Schwartz, Ph.D., Co-Director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, sums it up this way: "Rewarding children with unhealthy foods in school undermines our efforts to teach them about good nutrition. It's like teaching children a lesson on the importance of not smoking, and then handing out ashtrays and lighters to the kids who did the best job listening."

Summary

Kids learn preferences for food made available to them, including those that are unhealthy.⁷ Poor food choices and inadequate physical activity contribute to overweight and obesity. Currently, obesity among kids is at epidemic levels and can often lead to serious health problems.⁸

Recognizing kids with respect and words of appreciation are better motivators than rewards of food. Telling a child "I appreciate your help" is a healthy alternative to giving him candy for "good" behavior.

Food for Thought

"Rewards can be abused and overused. Too often students come to expect something in return for behavior or good grades when in reality they should

do the behavior for its intrinsic value." Middle School Teacher in Fayette County, Kentucky

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