

Alternatives to Food as a Reward

Food is commonly used to reward students for good behavior and academic performance. It's an easy, inexpensive and powerful tool to bring about immediate short-term behavior change. Yet, using food as reward has many negative consequences that go far beyond the short-term benefits of good behavior or performance.

Research clearly demonstrates that healthy kids learn better. To provide the best possible learning environment for children, schools must provide an environment that supports healthy behaviors. Students need to receive consistent, reliable health information and ample opportunity to use it. Finding alternatives to food rewards is an important part of providing a healthy school environment.

The number of birthdays and holidays celebrated by an average elementary school class means that sweets can become regular snacks, rather than occasional, special treats. In addition, it has become increasingly common for teachers to use candy to reward and motivate students. If food must be used as a reward, healthy choices are encouraged and it should be part of a learning experience. This flyer offers alternatives to help promote consistent messages about food and health.

Consequences of Using Food as Reward

Compromises Classroom Learning: Schools are institutions designed to teach and model appropriate behaviors and skills to children. Nutrition principles taught in the classroom are meaningless if they are contradicted by rewarding children with candy and other sweets. It's like saying, "You need to eat healthy foods to feel and do your best, but when you behave or perform your best, you will be rewarded with unhealthy food." Classroom learning about nutrition will remain strictly theoretical if schools regularly model unhealthy behaviors.

Contributes to Poor Health: Foods commonly used as rewards (like candy and cookies) can contribute to health problems for children, e.g., obesity, diabetes, hypertension and cavities. Food rewards provide unneeded calories and displace healthier food choices.

Encourages Overconsumption of Unhealthy Foods: Foods used as rewards are typically "empty calorie" foods – high in fat, sugar and salt with little nutritional value. Decreasing the availability of empty calorie foods is one strategy schools can use to address the current childhood obesity epidemic.

Contributes to Poor Eating Habits: Rewarding with food can interfere with children learning to eat in response to hunger and satiety cues. This teaches kids to eat when they are not hungry as a reward to themselves and may contribute to the development of disordered eating. 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, even healthy food, during class also reinforces eating outside of meal or snack times.

Increases Preference for Sweets: Food preferences for both sweet and non-sweet food increase significantly when foods are presented as rewards. This can teach children to prefer unhealthy foods.

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. 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 children²

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.

"Rewards can be abused and overused. Too often students learn to expect something in return for behavior or good grades when ideally they should do the behavior for its intrinsic value." – Middle School Teacher

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 or 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.

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-side morning announcements and/or the school's Web site
- A photo recognition board in a prominent location in the school
- A phone call, e-mail or letter sent home to parents or guardians commending a child's accomplishment
- A note from the teacher to the student commending his or her achievement

Many of these items are no- or low-cost. For pricier items, set up a point system where children earn points toward the bigger prize or encourage parents and local business owners to donate money or prizes. A point system also may be used for an entire class to earn a reward. 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, prizes or drawing "raffle tickets." Consider having a treasure chest or closet for children to pick from or gift wrap items and let students select mystery prizes.

Privileges

- Going first
- Choosing a class activity
- Helping the teacher, secretary or librarian
- Having an extra few minutes of recess or time at the end of class with a friend
- Sitting by friends or in a special seat next to or at the teachers desk
- "No homework" pass for a day
- Teaching the class
- Exemption for certain homework, half of homework
- Extra credit or credit for one wrong item on homework or quiz
- 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
- Eating lunch with a favorite person, teacher or principal
- Listening with a headset to a book on CD
- Going to the library to select a book to read
- Working at the school store
- Taking a walk with the principal or teacher
- Designing a class or hall bulletin board
- Writing or drawing on the blackboard/whiteboard
- Show and tell time
- Taking care of the class pet for a day or week or taking it home for the weekend
- Allowing a child to choose an extra recess activity for the class
- Using a beanbag chair for the day
- Choosing class job for the day or doing all the class jobs for week
- First choice of seats or moving desk to special spot
- Choosing music or movie for the class reward
- Using teacher's chair or desk for the day
- Time for cell phone use
- Prime parking spot
- Early dismissal
- Exempt from classroom duty

Rewards for the class

- Extra recess
- Eating lunch outdoors
- Going to the lunchroom first
- Reading time outdoors
- Holding class outdoors
- Extra art, music, computer, PE or reading time
- Listening to music while working or during lunch
- Dancing to music
- Playing a game or doing a puzzle together
- Free time at the end of the day
- A song, dance or performance by the teacher, students or guest
- A book read aloud to the class by a guest
- A field trip
- Join another class for indoor recess
- Assemblies or music concert

- Watching a video
- Teacher performs an undesirable or out of character task (i.e. eating something "gross")

School Supplies

- Pencils/pens: colored, with logos or other decorations
- Erasers
- Notepads/notebooks, folders
- Boxes of crayons
- Stencils
- Stamps
- Plastic scissors
- Bookmarks
- Highlighters or markers
- Colored chalk or sidewalk chalk
- Coloring books
- Rulers
- Glitter
- Pencil sharpeners, grips or boxes

Sports equipment or related gear

- Paddleballs
- Frisbees
- Water bottles
- NERF balls
- Hula hoops
- Head and wrist sweat bands
- Tennis racket
- Baseball glove
- Soccer ball
- Basketball
- Jump rope
- Hacky sacks
- Step counters

Toys/trinkets

- Stickers
- Yo-yos
- 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
- Spinning tops
- Marbles
- Jacks

- Playing cards
- Stretchy animals
- Silly putty
- Bubble fluid with wand
- Balloons
- Capsules that become sponges/figures when placed in water
- Inflatable toys
- Small dolls or action figures
- Pins
- Trading cards

Fashion wear

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

Miscellaneous

- Key chains
- Flashlights
- Cups
- Magnets
- Crazy straws
- Backscratchers
- A plant or seeds and a pot for growing a plant
- Books
- Free music downloads
- Gift certificate to a bookstore, video store, sporting goods store, skating rink, bowling alley or music store
- Movie passes
- Tickets to sporting events or play
- Puzzles or board games
- Stuffed animals
- Magazine subscriptions
- Celebrity autographed items

Ideas from other teachers

"I have my students earn letters to spell game day ... after the letters have been earned, we play reading or phonics-type board games. The kids beg for Game Day!"

"I give my students thirty minutes at the beginning of the week and they can earn or lose free time according to their behavior. I use a timer and turn it on if they are too loud working, lining up, etc. I add time when their behavior is good. Adding time is the most

effective. I save time by not waiting for them to settle down so I don't feel bad about the free time."