

# Effective & Healthy Rewards for Kids



*Rewards and performance accomplishments reinforce desirable behavior and encourage its repetition.*

## The Most Effective Rewards

- \* Are intrinsic (the behavior itself results in good feelings)
- \* Or, if extrinsic, the rewards
  - Are related to the behavior
  - Fit naturally into the context and mission of a classroom
  - Are given promptly after the positive behavior occurs
  - Are awarded consistently

at school, at home, and in the community

*The goal of rewarding is to help children internalize desirable behaviors, so external rewards are not needed.*

Schools have a responsibility to both teach and model healthy behaviors.

- Research clearly demonstrates that healthy kids learn better. The best learning environment includes consistent health messages that are supported by access to healthful foods, beverages, and physical activity.
- Non-food rewards support student health

## Disadvantages of Using Food as a Reward

- Teaches kids to eat when they're not hungry: The use of foods as rewards, pacifiers, and treats communicates to a child that there are reasons for eating other than hunger.<sup>1,2</sup> Using food to reward behavior or performance connects food to mood and can instill lifetime habits of rewarding or comforting oneself with food.
- Encourages over-consumption: Children's preferences for foods increase when those foods are used as rewards for performing non-food-related tasks; also, limiting those foods causes children to like them more.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Compromises health: Foods commonly used as rewards are "empty calorie" foods - high in calories, fat, sugar, and salt and low nutritional value. These foods displace healthier food choices and contribute to the development of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cavities.
- Undermines classroom learning: Nutrition principles taught in the classroom are meaningless if they are contradicted by rewarding with foods of low nutritional value.



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# Alternatives to Food as a Reward<sup>4</sup>

Remember the positive power of praise and recognition.  
Respect and words of appreciation can go a long way.

"Thanks for helping!"

"You did a great job!"

*The options for non-food rewards are limited only by imagination, time, and resources.*

## Recognition

- Recognize the student's achievement during school-wide announcements and/or the school's website
- Create a photo recognition board
- Write a note to the student commending the achievement
- Phone, email, or write a letter to parents/guardians
- Give a certificate of recognition/achievement

## Privileges

- Go first
- Choose a class activity
- Help the teacher
- Enjoy extra recess with a friend
- Make deliveries to the office
- Read outdoors
- Have a teacher read a special book to the class
- Do puzzles, word play, or brainteasers
- Take care of the class animal for the day
- Get "free choice" time at the end of the day
- Eat lunch with a teacher/principal
- Take a walk with the teacher/principal
- Select a book from the library
- Sit with a friend

## Earn Play Money, Tokens, or Points for

- Gift certificate to a bookstore or sporting goods store
- Sports equipment
- Ticket to an event or movie
- Magazine subscription
- For older children, enter a drawing for donated prizes
- Other reward items (see next column)

## Reward Items

- School supplies Sports equipment (Frisbee, hacky-sack, hula hoop, jump rope, ball)
- A plant, or seeds & a pot
- Paperback book
- Trophy, plaque, ribbon
- Sticker
- Magnet
- Stuffed animal
- Temporary tattoo
- Hair accessory
- Bracelet, necklace
- Shoe laces
- Sunglasses
- Cap
- T-shirt
- Cup
- Flashlight
- Trip to treasure box filled with toys/trinkets
- Various low-cost toy/trinket
- Extra credit

## Rewards for a Class

- Allow extra recess
- Provide extra PE, art, music, or reading time
- Dance to music
- Play a game (i.e., reading or phonic board game)
- Eat lunch in a special place
- Go to the lunchroom first
- Read outdoors
- Hold class outdoors
- Teacher reads aloud to the class
- Schedule a field trip
- Show a fun video

## References

1. Puhl R and Schwartz MB (2003). If you are good you can have a cookie: The link between childhood food rules and adult eating behaviors. *Eating Behaviors*, 4:283-293.
2. Birch LL (1999). Development of food preferences. *Annu Rev Nutr*, 19:41-62.
3. Fisher J and Birch LL (1999). Restricting access to palatable foods affects children's behavioral response, food selection and intake. *Am J Clin Nutr*, 69:1264-72.
4. Adapted from Alternatives to Food as Reward, Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Health & Nutrition Services and Child/Family/School Partnerships, 2004; Constructive Classroom rewards, Center for Science in the Public Interest, [www.cspinet.org/schoolfood](http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfood); Alternatives to Using Food as a Reward, Michigan Team Nutrition (a partnership between the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan State university Extension), 2004, [www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu/foodrewards.pdf](http://www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu/foodrewards.pdf).