

Alternatives to Food as Reward

Promoting a Healthy School Environment



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.



"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."
Marlene Schwartz, PhD, Co-Director, Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University

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.^{2,3}

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.^{3,4}



About 20 percent of children are overweight.¹ Over the past three decades, the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2-5 years and adolescents aged 12-19 years, and it has more than tripled for children aged 6-11 years.



What Schools Can Do

Ideas for Alternatives to Using Food as a Reward ^{5,6}

Schools can help promote a healthy learning environment by using nonfood rewards. The ideas below are just a beginning and can be modified for different ages. Be creative, and don't forget the simple motivation of recognizing students for good work or behavior.

Elementary School Students

- Make deliveries to office
- Teach class
- Sit by friends
- Eat lunch with teacher or principal
- Eat lunch outdoors with the class
- Have lunch or breakfast in the classroom
- Private lunch in classroom with a friend
- Be a helper in another classroom
- Play a favorite game or do puzzles
- Stickers, pencils, bookmarks
- Certificates
- Fun video
- Extra recess
- Walk with the principal or teacher
- Fun physical activity break
- School supplies
- Trip to treasure box filled with nonfood items (stickers, tattoos, pencils, erasers, bookmarks, desktop tents)
- Dance to favorite music in the classroom
- Paperback book
- Show-and-tell
- Bank system - Earn play money for privileges
- Teacher or volunteer reads special book to class
- Teacher performs special skill (singing, cart wheel, guitar playing, etc.)
- Read outdoors or enjoy class outdoors
- Have extra art time
- Have "free choice" time at end of the day or end of class period
- Listen with headset to a book on audiotape
- Items that can only be used on special occasions (special art supplies, computer games, toys)

Middle School Students

- Sit with friends
- Listen to music while working at desk
- Five-minute chat break at end of class
- Reduced homework or "no homework" pass
- Extra credit
- Fun video
- Fun brainteaser activities
- Computer time
- Assemblies
- Field trips
- Eat lunch outside or have class outside

High School Students

- Extra credit or bonus points
- Fun video
- Reduced homework
- Late homework pass
- Donated coupons to video stores, music stores or movies
- Drawings for donated prizes among students who meet certain grade standards

"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.

References

- 1 Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin LR, McDowell MA, Tabak CJ, Flegal KM. Prevalence of overweight and obesity in the United States, 1999-2004. *JAMA* 295:1549-1555. 2006.
- 2 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
- 3 Birch LL. Development of Food Preferences. *Annu Rev Nutr* 1999, 19:41-62
- 4 Fisher J, Birch LL. Restricting access to palatable foods affects children's behavioral response, food selection and intake. *Am J Clin Nutr* 1999;69:1264-72
- 5 Alternatives to Using Food as a Reward. Michigan State University Extension, 2003. <http://www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu/foodrewards.pdf>
- 6 Non-Food Ways to Raise Funds and Reward a Job Well Done. Texas Department of Agriculture, 2004. http://www.squaremeals.org/vgn/tda/files/2348/3614_1034_NonFoodRewards.pdf

In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age or disability. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 or (202) 720-6382 (TTY). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.