Healthy Non-food Rewards

Rewards happen at many levels across a school. Teachers, administrators and parent groups offer rewards to recognize and celebrate student accomplishments. The goal of rewarding students is to help them internalize desirable behaviors and create motivation for learning that comes from inside. The most effective rewards fit naturally into the context and mission of the school community and should promote healthy living as a desired value of the community.

ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS

TIP SHEET

Non-material rewards involving recognition, privileges and opportunities for physical activity or other types of enrichment are powerful ways to help meet these goals. Material rewards such as school supplies, trinkets, toys and gift certificates can be donated by parents or provided by parent-teacher organizations for use on a more limited basis.

Elementary School Students

- Make deliveries to office
- Watch a fun movie
- Teach class
- Be a helper in another classroom
- Read morning announcements
- Sit with friends
- Have lunch or breakfast in the classroom
- Play a favorite game or do puzzles
- Extra recess time
- Show and tell
- Free time at the end of class
- Dance to music in the classroom
- Gift certificate to school store (non-food items)
- Walk with the principal or teacher
- Fun physical activity break
- Teacher or volunteer reads special book to class
- Certificate, trophy, ribbon, plaque
- Listen to music or a book
- Read outdoors or have class outdoors
- Extra art, music or reading time
- Teacher performs special skill, e.g., singing, guitar playing, juggling
- Earn points or play money to spend on privileges or non-food items
- Commendation certificate or letter sent home to parents by teacher or principal
- Trip to treasure box filled with non-food items, e.g., stickers, pencils, erasers, bookmarks, school supplies
- Access to items that can only be used on special occasions

Reward with Recognition!

Consider recognizing students during morning announcements, at a school assembly, on a photo recognition board or on the school's website. Most kids enjoy hearing their successes acknowledged in front of their peers. Don't underestimate the power of small, personalized efforts such as a phone call or email to a student's parents, a hand-written note commending the achievement or a certificate of recognition.

Middle School Students

- Choose partners for activities
- Sit with friends
- Listen to music while working at desk
- Reduced homework or "no homework" pass
- Extra credit
- Fun movie
- Brainteaser puzzles, group activities and games
- Earn points or play money for privileges or nonfood items
- Computer time
- Free choice time or chat break at end of class
- Assemblies
- Field trips
- Eat lunch outside or have class outside

Healthy Non-Food Rewards

High School Students

- Extra credit
- Fun movie
- Reduced homework
- Late homework pass
- Donated coupons for music, movies or books
- Drawings for donated prizes
- Pep rally
- Recognition on morning announcements
- Tickets to school events, e.g., dances, sporting events

PTO/PTA Rewards

- Water bottles
- School-branded apparel
- Movie passes
- Special time with a teacher
- Active video games
- Pool party, hike or group trip to a kids fun place
- Raffle for bigger prizes, such as a bike, or a ride in a limo

Food Rewards

Food rewards contradict classroom lessons on nutrition, add empty calories to kids' diets and teach kids to eat when they're not hungry — setting the stage for unhealthy habits that can last a lifetime and contributing to the childhood obesity epidemic. One study found that every separate food-related practice (e.g., a food incentive or reward) that promotes low-nutrition foods in a school is associated with a 10% increase in students' body mass indexes (BMI).[1]

Start a schoolwide healthy rewards initiative:

- Find a teacher to be a healthy rewards champion.
- Put up a bulletin board promoting healthy rewards.
- Ask teachers to take a "no-food-as-rewards pledge."
- Give a presentation about healthy rewards at a staff meeting.
- Create school guidelines around healthy rewards.
- Provide trinkets for teachers to use with donations or PTA/PTO funds.
- Recognize teachers who give out non-food rewards.

"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

Action for Healthy Kids® is a nationwide grassroots network mobilizing school professionals, families and communities to take actions that improve school foods, nutrition education, physical activity and physical education for all students. Through funding opportunities, expert technical assistance, and our flagship program, Game On, Action for Healthy Kids supports schools in becoming healthier places where children thrive.

1: See ActionforHealthyKids.org/References