



Using Food as a Reward-Why it is Sending the Wrong Message to our Kids

The ultimate goal of rewarding children is to help them internalize positive behaviors so that they will not need a reward. Rewarding children in the home or in the classroom does not need to involve candy or food. Using candy or food as a reward reaches beyond the short-term benefits of good behavior. Rewarding children with candy or food:

- Encourages overeating of foods high in sugar and fat
- Teaches children to eat when they're not hungry
- Teaches children to reward themselves with food
- Teaches children to connect food to mood
- Contributes to poor health
- Undermines healthy habits

Parents and educators need to be concerned about the following:

- One in three children is overweight; one in seven is obese. These rates have doubled in children and tripled in adolescents in the last twenty years. An overweight four-year old is 20% more likely to become an obese adult; an overweight teen, eighty percent.
- The health care costs associated with diet-related illnesses are staggering and may soon exceed those associated with cigarette smoking: in 2000, the total cost of obesity was estimated at \$117 billion; in 2002 the costs related to diabetes were \$32 billion.
- America's tweens more than doubled their use of type-2 diabetes medications between 2002 and 2005, with girls between 10 and 14 years of age showing a 166 percent increase. The likely cause: obesity, which is closely associated with Type 2 diabetes.

Giving children candy on a regular basis helps to foster a sweet tooth and decreases the chance that these children will be open to eating the wide variety of foods needed for growth and health. Research on child feeding practices has shown that foods used as “rewards” become more desirable to children than if they had not been used as rewards. So, when candy is used as a reward, children come to like it more and want it more than they would otherwise. As seen in the above statistics, this behavior can pave the way for the formation of bad habits and patterns later in life.

By giving children empty calories as a reward for good behavior, we are saying “Here is something unhealthy for you because you behaved so well.” Does this make sense?

Below is a list of alternatives to candy and food which can be used at home:

- Stickers, pencils, and other school supplies
- Receive a “mystery pack” (notepad, folder, sports cards, etc.)
- Coloring books
- Stamps
- Stencils
- Extra stories at bedtime
- Special bubble bath
- Go to the library for special story time
- Key chains
- Special pens; markers; crayons
- A special adventure trip (e.g. museum or aquarium)
- For older children-maybe a friend sleeping over

Getting More Involved

As a parent, getting more involved in school practices and policies is something you can do to safeguard your children from a school reward system built on empty calories and low nutritive foods. Below BSF has included a list of alternatives to candy and food which can be used in the classroom. In addition, it may be beneficial to find out what your school district’s Wellness Policy says about using food and candy as a reward for children. Depending on the language within the policy as it relates to food rewards, as a parent, you can talk to the Wellness Committee about implementing the guidelines or possibly amending the policy to discourage the use of food and candy as a reward system.

The following list of rewards can be used in the classroom:

- Sit by friends
- Teach the class
- Have extra art time
- Enjoy class outdoors
- Have an extra recess
- Play a computer game
- Read to a younger class
- Get a no homework pass
- Make deliveries to the office
- Listen to music while working
- Play a favorite game or puzzle
- Walk with a teacher during lunch
- Eat lunch outdoors with the class
- Eat lunch with a teacher or principal
- Be a helper in another class
- Dance to favorite music in the classroom
- Get “free choice” time at the end of the day
- Teacher can perform special skills (i.e. sing)
- Teacher can read a special book to the class
- Give a 5-minute chat break at the end of the day
- Extra credit
- Computer time
- Field trips

For more information, please visit the following sites:

[Alternatives To Food As Rewards](#)

By the Connecticut State Department of Education

[Non-Food Ways to Raise Money and Reward a Job Well Done](#)

By the Texas Department of Agriculture