

Avoid Using Food/Physical Activity as Punishment OR Food as a Reward

In the past, at school, home, and throughout the community children were frequently offered food as a reward for “good” behavior. Often these foods had little or no nutritional value but were easy, inexpensive, and appeared to bring about short-term behavior change. Even if the foods offered are healthy there is still a problem with promoting the connecting of food with behavior or feelings.

We already have so many built in food associations such as holidays, birthdays, and other family events. In our modern society there is rarely an activity with which we do not associate food. Nutritionists and health-care professionals are quickly coming to the conclusion that in order to turn the obesity epidemic around, we will have to really work on reversing some of our long-ingrained habits.

Disadvantages to using food as a reward:

- It teaches children to connect food to mood.
- It connects being good or doing good with eating.
- It suggests yet one more association between food and behavior or feelings.
- It detracts from the many other possible ideas for rewarding good behavior.
- It does not allow children to develop other more beneficial connections such as learning to associate exercise or reading or playing a game as a reward.
- If the food offered is not nutritionally balanced, it encourages overeating of foods high in added sugar and fat.
- It teaches children to eat (even when they’re not hungry) as a reward to themselves.
- It undermines healthy habits valued by most parents and taught in school.
- It contradicts the premise that food should be for sustenance.

“The best policy is to reinforce children in ways that support health.”

Physical activity and food should also not be linked to punishment.

- Punishing children by taking away recess or physical education classes reduces their already-scarce opportunities for physical activity. Regular aerobic physical activity improves academic achievement and can reduce disruptive behavior. Another counter-productive punishment is forcing children to do physical activity, such as laps or push-ups. This teaches children to dislike physical activity (the punishment) which is important for maintaining wellness and a healthy body weight. Food should not be withheld as a means of punishment.

Examples of beneficial (and inexpensive) rewards for children:

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 verbal praise (including in front of others), nods, or smiles can mean a lot. These rewards affirm a child’s worth as a person.

Recognition

- Trophy, plaque, ribbon, or certificate in recognition of a desired behavior or a sticker with an affirming message (e.g., “Great job”).
- A phone call, note, or email sent home to parents or guardians commending a child’s accomplishment.
- A note from the teacher to the student commending his or her achievement.

Privileges

- Going first (e.g., in an activity, at the head of the line, etc.)
- Choosing a class activity
- Helping the teacher
- Sitting by friends or in a special seat next to or at the teacher’s desk
- Eating lunch with a teacher
- Selecting a book for group reading
- Taking a walk with the teacher
- Writing or drawing on the blackboard/whiteboard