

How To Use Rewards To Promote Good Behavior In Your Children

from the American Counseling Association

As parents we all want to encourage good behaviors in our children, whether it's playing with other children, doing schoolwork, performing family chores or simply interacting with adults.

Children learn their behaviors by associating them with consequences. When a child is rewarded for doing something well he has learned it's a positive consequence. If he is punished for a behavior he learns it is a negative consequence. And when either consequence is repeated over time, it can lead to a change in behavior.

Research has shown that pleasant, positive consequences (rewards) are more effective in changing behaviors than unpleasant consequences (punishment). Such rewards can be either tangible, such as a toy or book or favorite food, or intangible, such as praise for doing something well. But regardless of the type of reward, how it is used is important if it is to be effective.

- Reward only occasionally. If a child can figure when a reward will be provided, he or she will only produce the desired behavior when it's certain the reward will be forthcoming.

- Reward extra effort. When a child is rewarded for doing more than expected, the reward becomes motivation to continue to go beyond the call of duty.

- Reward immediately after the desired behavior. When the reward is delayed, it loses its motivational power with most children.

- Reward effort, not just performance. When your child is clearly working hard to do something well, reward the effort that's being expended, even if he or she falls short of the desired goal.

- Use a variety of rewards. Using one reward constantly can cause it to lose its effect.

- Allow your child to select the reward. Giving your child some say in what reward really matters to him or her helps make the reward much more effective.

- When giving a tangible reward, combine it with a positive word or touch. Doing so greatly increases the value of the reward.

Rewards shouldn't be the only motivation to get a child to perform a task. Nor should rewards be used as bribes to get desired behavior. Instead, set a positive example, encourage positive behavior as a meaningful goal itself, and then use rewards sparingly to show that you appreciate and approve of what has been accomplished. When children learn they're earning your praise and appreciation, that's the real motivation for behavior to be repeated.

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