

Constructive Classroom Rewards

Promoting good habits while protecting children's health

Rewarding children in the classroom can involve a wide variety of rewards that provide positive reinforcement for children's behavior — without using food.

"It's just a little treat." The harm in using food to reward children

Schools have an opportunity to not only teach children how to make healthy choices and to eat to fulfill nutritional needs, but also to provide an environment that fosters healthy eating. Providing food based on performance or behavior connects food to mood. This practice can encourage children to eat treats even when they are not hungry and can instill lifetime habits of rewarding or comforting themselves with food behaviors associated with unhealthy eating or obesity. Awarding children food during class also reinforces eating outside of meal or snack times.

Since few studies have been conducted on the effect of using food rewards on children's long-term eating habits, the best policy is to not reward children with food at all. At minimum, children should not be rewarded using low-nutrition foods.

The value of rewarding children with non-food rewards

As teachers know, classroom rewards can be an effective way to encourage positive behavior. Children, like everyone, alter their actions based on short-term anticipated consequences. When trying to foster a new behavior, it is important to reward a child consistently each time he or she does the desired behavior. Once the behavior has become an established habit, rewards can be given every now and then to encourage the child to maintain the preferred behavior.

The ultimate goal of rewarding children is to help them internalize positive behaviors so that they will not need a reward. Eventually, self-motivation will be sufficient to induce them to perform the desired behavior, and outside reinforcement will no longer be necessary.

Physical activity and food should not be linked to punishment

Punishing children by taking away recess or physical education classes reduces their already-scarce opportunities for physical activity. Another counter-productive punishment is forcing children to do physical activity such as laps or pushups. Children often learn to dislike things that are used as punishments. Thus, penalizing children with physical activity might lead them to avoid activities that are important for maintaining wellness and a healthy body weight.

In addition, food should not be withheld as a means of punishing children.

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