

Building a Reward System in the Family Outside of Food

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As a parent, it may be a common impulse to decide to reward or punish your children with food. For instance, often parents may attempt to get their child to attend doctors' appointments by offering them candy in return. However, experts advise that using food as a reward or punishment can have detrimental effects for individuals in the long-term. [1]

Emotional Eating

For instance, children who are rewarded with food may learn to use food as a primary way to cope with unpleasant emotions. While, we all [eat emotionally on occasion](#)-when food becomes one's primary means with which to cope with feelings, this can become problematic. [2]



Further, restricting a child's food intake (whether for punishment or in the intention of helping your child to "eat more healthfully") has been shown to backfire and may lead to children becoming less able to attune to their hunger cues and intuitive sense of food preferences. Laura Cipullo, a registered dietitian, exemplified this point when she stated,

"By banishing certain fun foods, you may set your child up to sneak foods or binge eat. Be sure to stock your house with a wide variety of wholesome nutritious foods. This variety will include fun foods too. Fun foods include cakes, cookies, and chips. I encourage all families (no matter what body size) to offer cookies at snack time once a week. I also encourage a few fun sides such as potato chips a couple times a week with meals. Offering fun foods alongside nutrient-dense foods helps in many ways. It satisfies cravings, models moderation, and prevents shame and binge eating high-calorie low nutrition foods." [2]

Other Options for Rewards

It is important to ask oneself the question, "how can you work to build a reward system in the family outside of food?" My answer to this question might surprise you. While different systems of parenting may work best for different kids, research indicates that external rewards often are not highly effective motivators in the long-term. [3]

For promoting short-term behavior change in your children it could be helpful to use non-food related rewards, such as:

- Getting to do a fun/special activity they enjoy
- Buying them a toy or game

- Giving them stickers on a behavioral chart-which could add up to a larger “reward.”

However, studies show that the positive [effects of rewards are often short-lived](#). [4] While using rewards to promote behavior change can be useful temporarily, a better long-term strategy is to try to improve your child’s sense of intrinsic motivation. [5]

Talking it Out



Having conversations with your children about the outcomes of their behaviors is one strategy for working to build their sense of intrinsic motivation. [6] For instance, let’s say that child gets their homework done in a timely manner and you are then able to take them on a play date with friends. You could then point out to your child that because they got their homework done right after school, they were able to have time for a play date.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge your child with positive feedback, when they do something well. Taking a “strengths-based” approach will help your child to feel more pride in their accomplishments. Further, if your child is struggling to accomplish something, it might be helpful to ask open-ended questions to see what barriers might be getting in their way.

Modeling Behaviors



Finally, as a parent you can also model for your children the behaviors and values that you want them to espouse. Children often look up to their parents as role models and if your actions contradict what you are telling them-this could be sending mixed messages. For instance, you can model things, such as healthy habits, communication skills, and the ability to apologize and take accountability for your mistakes.

Ultimately, the stronger a relationship that you can build with your children-the better. In fact, “Studies show that children with a secure attachment to their parents -even 3- and 4-year-olds – have greater resiliency and are more self-reliant.” [7] Work to have conversations with your children, validate their feelings, highlight their values and accomplishments, and seek to listen to their problems with a compassionate and non-judgmental stance.

While it might be tempting to use food as a reward for your child, there are so many more effective ways to promote positive and long-lasting behavior change. Paul Tough discusses the most common misperception about children and motivation when he says,

“Until recently, researchers believed that the leading factor in a child’s success was cognitive skills, the kind of intelligence that gets measured on IQ tests...But in my visits with psychologists, doctors,

and economists around the country, I learned they've identified more important qualities that lead to success: persistence, self-control, curiosity, grit, conscientiousness, self-confidence, and optimism.” [8]

By utilizing some of the strategies listed above, you can work to build your child's sense of intrinsic motivation, as well as the qualities that lead to success and overall fulfillment.



About the author: Jennifer Rollin, MSW, LGSW is a therapist, body-image activist, and writer who specializes in working with adolescents, body image concerns, survivors of trauma, and mood disorders. Jennifer is a blogger for The Huffington Post and Psychology Today, as well as a contributing writer for Eating Disorder Hope. For body-positive, self-love, inspiration, “like” her on Facebook at Jennifer Rollin, MSW, LGSW.

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We at Eating Disorder Hope understand that eating disorders result from a combination of environmental and genetic factors. If you or a loved one are suffering from an eating disorder, please know that there is hope for you, and [seek immediate professional help](#).

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