

The Drawbacks of Rewards

Many parents decide to use rewards instead of punishments in order to control their children's behaviour. Leave the park without crying and you'll get a cookie; collect twenty gold stars for doing chores and earn a new electronic game—these are typical reward systems and they generally work to motivate children in the short term.

However, rewards have their drawbacks. Like punishment, they work by manipulating and controlling children's behaviour rather than by encouraging self-discipline through building a sense of responsibility and moral values.

Possible problems

- **Rising Expectations** - It may take more substantial rewards to satisfy older children. The boy who was given a dinky toy for every week he got himself dressed for day care may be demanding a convertible for staying in school by the time he's sixteen.
- **Two Can Play** - Bargaining can go in both directions. Once your child has become accustomed to hearing, "If you do this, you'll get that," you may start hearing, "I'll do this, if you give me that." If you don't want to have to negotiate every time you ask for help, be prepared to explain that family members usually do things for one another without expecting payment.
- **What Values Are Taught?** - When you choose the payoff, keep in mind that you are sending your children a message about what you think is important in life. When you say, "Do this and you'll get that," you are basically telling your child that "this" isn't worth doing for its own sake. In reality, we usually have good reasons for what we require children to do, reasons that have nothing to do with an immediate reward. We want them to learn to look after their own health and safety (wash your hands before eating, wear a helmet when riding your bike). We want them to have consideration for other people (wait your turn, clean up your mess).

If you choose material rewards (toys, games, etc.) for good behaviour, your child might decide that what really counts in life is being able to accumulate a lot of "stuff"—and that if she doesn't own the latest fancy toy, there must be something wrong with her.

If you give food as a reward, a child could learn to associate food, particularly sweets, with approval and feeling good. Some professionals feel that this is a factor in eating disorders.

Is there anything wrong with offering smiles and hugs as rewards? Not if they are given freely at other times as well, even when a child is not on his best behaviour. When expressions of love are only available as rewards, the child could think that he is only lovable when he does what someone else wants.

So What *Can* Parents Use?

- Reward children by **offering choices within limits** that are acceptable to you. "You may watch TV one hour a day before supper. The programs are your choice." As the child gets older and gains experience in decision-making, the limits get broader. Giving more control to children teaches them not only how you expect them to behave but also how to make wise choices.
- **Give feedback by describing** what you see or how you feel instead of making a judgement. Instead of "Good job!", try "The bathroom fixtures really shine. Thank you!" The child can make his or her own evaluation: "My work makes a difference in this family."
- Sometimes kids seem to annoy parents just to get their attention. Encourage better behaviour by **giving them attention and showing approval** when you like what they've done. "It's great to find the sink empty when I come home from work!"
- **Make the reward the logical consequence of the act.** "If you are ready for bed by eight, we'll have time to snuggle and read a story. If not, we'll try again tomorrow."
- **Choose rewards that fit your value system.** If you believe in family togetherness, celebrate a good week with a family video and popcorn on Saturday night.

by Betsy Mann

Sources: Faber and Mazlish, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*; Crary, *Pick Up Your Socks*. For more about the use of rewards to motivate children, visit www.alfiekohn.com.