
Regarding Rewards

Should you be a gold-sticker sticker?

By Teri Degler

One morning in the schoolyard I asked a group of parents if they ever used rewards—stickers, star charts and the like. Their responses were telling: “Well, yes, I hate to admit it, but I have.” “Once I was so desperate I tried a star chart.” “Don’t tell anybody, but I used stickers to help wean my daughter from her nighttime bottle.” The playground poll sums up how many of us react to tangible rewards: We feel guilty when we use them—and we thank our lucky (gold) stars when they work!

Perhaps we don’t have to feel quite so conflicted about this, suggests David Factor, a Toronto psychologist and father of two. It helps, he says, if you understand that a reward is simply anything that follows a specific behaviour and makes that behaviour more likely to occur again. “Social rewards”—praise, encouragement and hugs—are a natural part of parenting and are often all that’s needed in developing a new skill or improving a certain behaviour. But in cases where a pat on the back or an enthusiastic high-five isn’t quite enough, tangible rewards can sometimes help.

“When my daughter, Tamara, was about three she was afraid to use the toilet for bowel movements,” says Toronto mom Eileen Benson. “But she also disliked the feeling of having a messy diaper, so she would spend whole days holding everything in. She was really suffering, but nothing I tried worked. All I could do to keep things from getting worse was to make sure she was eating really healthy, high-fibre foods.

“Then one day when I was at my wit’s end, a friend came over and brought Tamara one of those white-flour, sprinkle doughnuts. Tamara, of course, really wanted it. But I had to explain she couldn’t

eat anything like that when she wasn’t having bowel movements. Immediately—even though this hadn’t been my intention—she jumped up and ran to the potty.”

This made Benson think a reward system might be the solution to their problem. With her daughter’s help, Benson made a chart and put it on the fridge. Every time Tamara went to the potty, Benson praised her and let her pick a sticker to put on the chart. In less than two weeks, the problem was pretty well solved. “Some people might think this was manipulation,” says Benson, “but I never saw it that way. The stickers just seemed to help Tamara redirect her energy or provide her with something else to focus on.”

Probably the most common concern about rewards is that they are a form of bribery. Supporters of rewards counter this by saying a bribe is, by definition, an enticement to do something wrong (“I’ll be your friend if you help me play this trick on the teacher”). Still, rewards can be manipulative. Edmonton family physician and mother of three Diana Andriashek says this is true “when parents use rewards to suit their own needs rather than the needs of the child”—such as when a father hands his daughter some money and tells her to go buy some ice cream and stop bugging him.

This is very different, Andriashek says, from using rewards to focus on the positive, the things your child is doing right instead of wrong. This, she says, is an acceptable way “to help shape a child’s behaviour... and build feelings of competence and self-esteem.” For example, when your daughter goes to bed by the 8:30 goal and gets to roll over and plunk the sticker on the chart, you comment on what a good job she’s doing and this helps her feel good

about herself. It’s what you say, along with the reward, that makes it work.

Brenda Linn-Stringer, a Toronto mother and educator who has done doctoral studies on the effect of rewards on motivation, says that “tangible rewards should be used only with sensitivity and caution, and only in specific, limited situations”—not, she says, as an overall approach to parenting, as it is when families have charts, points or monetary rewards set all the time to elicit everything from compliant behaviour to the completion of chores.

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“Human beings are complex creatures,” says Linn-Stringer. “Children are naturally going to respond to positive reinforcement. But they are also going to think about why you’re rewarding them—and they can come to two very different conclusions: One, that you really believe their accomplishment is worthwhile and you want to acknowledge it. Or two, that you think the task you’re rewarding is boring or unpleasant in itself and requires some sugar coating—like practising scales on the piano.

“There’s an old story,” she says, “about a man who was being bothered by the noise a bunch of teenagers kept making, so he started to pay them to make the noise every day. Then, after a while, he stopped paying them—and they stopped making the noise!”

Ten Tips

If lots of love, attention and role-modelling don't seem to be enough to help your child master a particular skill or change a negative behaviour, and you decide tangible rewards are needed, here are a few tips that may help:

1. Pick one specific task or behaviour to work on—toilet training or aggression against a new sibling, for example.
2. Decide if you're going to reward the task itself (going to the potty), or a replacement behaviour (touching the baby gently).
3. Involve your child as much as possible—i.e. in making the chart and picking the reward. Be upfront about what you're doing and why. The more your child shares your goals and feels involved, the better.
4. Small rewards like stickers generally work better than big rewards like expensive toys. The fun of filling out a sticker chart often solves the problem before the chart is finished, and your child may completely forget about the larger toy he was promised.

5. When the desired behaviour occurs, let your child put on the sticker or drop the marble in the jar.
6. If you're not getting the desired behaviour, reward the closest thing to it, and gradually move towards your goal.
7. Be consistent and reward immediately or within a set time—an hour is forever for a two-year-old, so why would he bother?
8. Be sure you accompany the tangible reward with praise and encouragement, including information that helps your child see her progress: "Look how Michael smiles when you rub his back so gently!"
9. Gradually decrease the tangible rewards until you're using only praise and encouragement again.
10. Remember to use the reward system to train *yourself* to notice your child's good behaviour, and acknowledge it to him. See if you can do this daily without the reward system to remind you.

Several studies, adds Linn-Stringer, have shown that "unless tangible rewards somehow convey information—for example, your delight or appreciation or recognition of an accomplishment—their use can actually erode a child's intrinsic motivation."

One of the most significant factors in how a child perceives a reward is the relationship between the child and the adult who's offering it. Martha Massey, a Courtenay, B.C. teacher, recently saw an example of this. "I was observing several sixth-graders at the end of the day. They were all bursting with preadolescent energy but, instead of rushing outside, they were clamouring to help their teacher with chores. When they finished the chores, the teacher let them each pick a chocolate dollar from a bucket. Then they all ran off, pleased as punch. Watching this, it was so clear to me that the real reward for the kids was the wonderfully positive interaction they were having with their teacher while they were working. The chocolate was just a token—a little something that sweetened an already sweet relationship."

Eileen Benson points out that manipulation—and the perception of it—are also avoided when your child is involved and wants to solve the problem as much as you do. "Tamara and I recently set up a sticker chart to help her get to school on time. But

it didn't work. I'm the only one who wanted to get her to school in time for the bell. In the end, we found there were other things that were making her unhappy at school that needed to be dealt with."

As for rewarding daily tasks like picking up dirty socks or helping with the dishes (as opposed to extra jobs like cutting the grass that a child might reasonably earn money for), Linn-Stringer says this practice "can reduce what should be helpful family interactions into hard-core bargaining sessions. Remember, the reward game is a two-way street. The child can end up thinking, 'Well, if I'm not going to get a treat, I'm not going to behave.'"

Andriashek agrees with this warning but says, "For me, rewards and other forms of positive reinforcement are ways of helping parents find the child's strengths." This is particularly important, she says, "with strong-willed children who tend to respond to every form of discipline by saying things like 'Fine. Turn off the TV; I didn't want to watch it anyway.'"

"This has certainly been true with my 13-year-old daughter. I realized early on that I could nag her into the ground to change behaviours, but if I did that, I'd lose her. And so I use positive reinforcement instead and focus on the things she does well."

Using rewards, says Andriashek, also helps stop a downward spiral of negativity. If, for example, you get angry and punish your five-year-old because she hits her little brother every time he frustrates her, you tend to increase her frustration and the likelihood of her striking out at him in some way. But if you focus on a behaviour that she exhibits instead of hitting, for instance being patient—first by using praise and other social rewards and then, if needed, moving on to tangible rewards—you break the cycle. And you help her *see* herself as a person who's patient instead of one who hits.

Even more importantly, says Andriashek, it helps you begin to notice how often she's kind and patient with him—something that may well have gone unnoticed while your attention was fixed so firmly on her misbehaviour. This means, Andriashek adds with a laugh, "it may well be the parent who's being 'trained' by the use of rewards as much as the child."

Resources

The Discipline Book: Everything You Need to Know to Have a Better-Behaved Child—From Birth to Age Ten, by William Sears, MD, and Martha Sears, RN, Little, Brown, 1995.