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Rewards Can Give Children an Extra Boost

By Carolyn Webster-Stratton

Young children work hard to meet their milestones — whether it's becoming toilet trained, dressing independently, playing co-operatively or learning to read. Encouragement and praise from parents help them get there, but occasionally kids need a little extra incentive. That's where rewards can be helpful.

Parents sometimes worry that rewards will make their children “sticker dependent,” or that using rewards will decrease inner motivation. It's true that these things might happen when rewards are not well planned or are not developmentally appropriate. However, when used correctly, rewards can help kids succeed, make them proud of their accomplishments and motivate them to keep trying to overcome challenges.

In my book, *The Incredible Years*, I outline the steps parents should follow when setting up a reward system or explaining rewards to children:

- Define the desired behaviour clearly: “Sit quietly and read a few pages of your book” is better than “Turn off the TV and do something else.”
- Don't make reward programs too complex; choose one or two behaviours to start.
- Choose incentives that are cheap and fun. An extra bedtime story or 10 minutes of playtime can work as well or better than a toy or prize.
- Pair rewards with praise and attention.
- When you see the behaviour you want, reward your child.
- Change or phase out the rewards as the behaviour becomes easier for your child.
- For kids ages four to six, spontaneous, surprise rewards are the best way to celebrate their success. “So if your five-year-old waited quietly until you were off the phone, treat him to a cookie, or some special play time with you, or a story for beginning so patient.
- Six- to 10-year-old often like points or stickers they can trade in for a reward of their choice (subject to your approval, of course).
- Bribing children with the promise of a reward while they are misbehaving is ineffective and counterproductive.

Here are two ways parents might use rewards. Six-year-old Marcus is struggling with reading. When his parents ask him to read instead of watch TV, he gets frustrated, distracted and quickly gives up. So his mother sets up a system in which he receives a special dinosaur sticker every time he reads a page with her. When he has five stickers, Marcus can have 10 minutes of playtime with his mom (or a small treat, or TV time). Marcus's mom uses a kitchen timer to let him know when 10 minutes have passed and he can stop reading and do something else. She sits with him while he is reading, coaching and praising his effort: “I'm so proud of how hard you worked to read those pages! I bet you're proud of yourself for doing that much reading!” Once Marcus is more independent and self-confident about reading, his mom can eliminate the reward or set a harder goal,

such as reading more pages before getting a sticker.

Now consider another six-year-old boy, Ben, who throws a tantrum at the mall when his mom asks him to sit quietly while she speaks with a sales clerk. She responds by giving some candy to stop yelling. The candy is a bribe, not a reward, because it is given *before* the desired behaviour has occurred and is actually reinforcing the yelling behavior.

Misusing rewards does not help Ben to learn how to wait independently; he's actually learning to use tantrums to get what he wants. A better way to handle the situation would be for Ben's mom to plan with him that he could earn a sticker at each store where he waited quietly, and when he earned four stickers he'd be treated to special treat such as sugar-free candy or ice cream.

I like to describe rewards as a kind of scaffolding that can be removed when the new behaviour has a solid foundation. Remember how you supported your baby as he learned to crawl and then walk? Rewards can perform the same role in a child's emotional and social development.

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