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BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION: REWARDING CHILDREN FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR

1) STATE CLEARLY THE RULE THAT NEEDS TO BE FOLLOWED.

Make sure you have clearly stated what rule needs to be followed in order to get the reward. State the rule so that you are telling your child what behavior you want to see. (“Play quietly and share with your brother,” rather than “No yelling or fighting.”) Be clear about what the reward will be.

2) WHEN A REWARD IS NOT EARNED, LIMIT COMMENTS ABOUT WHAT YOUR CHILD DID WRONG.

When a child does not earn the reward, explain no more than once what they did wrong. Then put the emphasis on the fact that the child has another chance right now (or soon) to try to earn the reward. This helps the child to be encouraged that they can follow the rule next time and earn the reward. When their failure is emphasized, a child will become discouraged. This may lead to tears, tantrums, defiance, or arguing.

- “I really like to see you earn stickers. I wanted to give you a sticker for playing quietly while I was on the phone, but you were noisy. Then say with enthusiasm: “In a few minutes I will make another phone call. I’m sure you will be able to play quietly next time.”

3) GIVE REWARDS ONLY WHEN THEY ARE EARNED.

To make a behavior modification system effective, give rewards only for good behavior. Sometimes adults are hesitant to withhold rewards for fear of tears or tantrums. But children catch on quickly if they get a reward even when they broke the rule. Be prepared to be firm in spite of a child’s reaction.

4) ALWAYS PRAISE YOUR CHILD FOR FOLLOWING THE RULES.

Your child needs to hear what he has done well, so consistently let him know. Eventually you will phase out the rewards and simply give verbal praise for following the rules. Get into the habit of using verbal praise so that it will be easier to transition from rewards to simply praise.

5) DON’T TAKE AWAY A REWARD ONCE IT HAS BEEN EARNED.

When a child starts breaking a rule after he has earned a few stickers for following that rule, it is tempting to take away the earned stickers in order to motivate him to behave. Usually the child reacts to that situation with discouragement and anger and is less motivated to try to follow the rule. Instead, realize that not earning additional stickers is enough of a consequence for him. If he stops trying to earn more stickers, consider whether you have picked the right reward or whether you might have accidentally done something to discourage him from continuing to try.

6) PICK EFFECTIVE REWARDS.

- Not every child will be motivated by the same rewards. Hand stamps and stickers are effective for some children but not others. If you have two or more children, each may require different rewards. Use your creativity and notice what appeals to each child. (See article entitled “Rewards for Young Children.”)
- For some young children, bite-sized food rewards need to be used when you begin behavior modification. Then when they get used to being rewarded for good behavior, you can shift the rewards to something other than food. Do not continue to use food rewards for more than a short time.
- Teenagers require totally different rewards, e.g. time with friends or time using electronics.
- Children enjoy helping pick rewards. Just be sure you work out the reward in advance and that you stay in charge of the rewards. Don’t give in to demands for specific rewards that you view as inappropriate.

7) THE BEST REWARDS COST NO MONEY AND INVOLVE SPENDING TIME WITH YOU.

- Playing a 5 or 10 minute game with you rather than watching a video
- Coloring or drawing with you rather than a food treat

8) VARY THE REWARDS.

Keep one step ahead of your children by varying the rewards. Otherwise, they will lose interest in earning rewards.

9) ADJUST REWARDS ON A REGULAR BASIS.

Your aim is to challenge your child by making the rewards harder to earn as he gets better at the desired behavior. At the same time the rewards cannot be too difficult to earn or your child will become discouraged. Plan to review and adjust rewards, as needed.

10) EVENTUALLY PHASE OUT THE REWARDS.

When your child is following the rule well for a period of time, you can begin to reduce the frequency of rewards or require that he follow the rule for a longer time before getting the reward. Slowly inch up your expectations as the behavior improves. Don’t do it abruptly. Sometimes parents discover that they no longer need to reward a behavior when they realize that they forgot to reward and their child didn’t notice. If the behavior modification was effective, then plan with your child to use rewards on another behavior that needs improvement.

Margaret W. Neal, LCSW, is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice in Riverside, CA. Her work focuses on “helping children and their parents.” For more information, visit Margaret’s website at www.margaretwneal.com.