

Classroom Rewards



Objective

Discourage the use of food as a reward and promote the use of alternative types of rewards.



Key Messages

Food rewards can put a child at risk for establishing an unhealthy relationship with food and eating.

- Providing food rewards between meals teaches students to eat when they're not hungry instead of listening to their hunger cues.
- Using food to reward good behavior establishes a relationship between feelings and emotions (achievement, success, etc.) and food, putting a child at risk for disordered eating later in life.^{1,4}

Food rewards in the classroom contribute to poor eating habits and poor health.

- Foods used as a reward in the classroom are often “empty calories” that are high in fat, sugar and salt with little nutritional value that displace healthier food choices.
- Frequent consumption of cookies and candy can contribute to health problems such as obesity, childhood cavities and hypertension.
- Food rewards increase preference for unhealthy foods, both sweet and non-sweet.^{1,2}
- School-wide food practices that include nutrient-poor food rewards are associated with higher BMIs in students.³

Unhealthy food rewards compromise what is taught about nutrition as part of classroom curriculum.

- “Rewarding children with unhealthy foods in school undermines our efforts to teach them about good nutrition. It’s like teaching children a lesson on the importance of not smoking, and then handing out ashtrays and lighters to the kids who did the best job listening.” - Marlene Schwartz, Ph.D., Co-Director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders.⁵

There are many creative, non-food reward alternatives for teachers to use.

- Some examples of healthy non-food rewards include: extra recess time, music while doing work, homework coupons, eating lunch with a teacher, allowing students to sit with their friends, stickers, pencils, etc. (For hundreds of additional examples check out the resources in the “key resources” below.)

Food rewards in the classroom increase the risk of distributing a food that a student has a food allergy to.

- Reduce the risk of triggering a food allergy by using non-food rewards.



Key Strategies

- **Establish and implement a non-food reward policy at the school or district level.** Talk with key school stakeholders and determine how health-promoting rewards can be integrated into a school or district's pre-existing behavior support system. A flow chart may be helpful to communicate the plan to teachers.
- **Communicate the large variety of non-food reward options to staff.** Many healthy alternatives to using food as a reward are listed in the "key resources" section below. Hold a brainstorming session at a staff meeting. There's always room to be creative and make up your own as well!
- **Avoid withholding food as a punishment for poor behavior or academic performance.**



Success Stories

Louise Archer Elementary School, Vienna, Virginia Reward Walks

Louise Archer elementary school recognizes and rewards hard-working students by offering students Friday afternoon reward walks with their principal. Not only do the students feel recognized for their efforts, but they have the opportunity to engage in physical activity that's beneficial to their health and students report that the walking breaks help increase their focus when in the classroom! For more information on Reward Walks, visit: http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn//Resources/p_case6.pdf



Sample Policy Language

"Food rewards or incentives shall not be used in classrooms to encourage student achievement or desirable behavior, and foods and beverages will not be withheld as punishment."

"Teachers shall use physical activity as a reward for academic performance or good behavior, as appropriate."⁶

"X school will use only health-promoting, non-food rewards as part of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system."



Resources for Implementation

- **Alternatives to Using Food as a Reward:**

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/foodrewards_290201_7.pdf

- **Constructive Classroom Rewards:** http://www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/constructive_rewards.pdf

- **Rewards Kids Will Crave:**

http://polkdhsd7.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_3751710/File/D7%20PBS%20Behavior%20Intervention%20Website%20Resources/Rewards%20Kids%20Will%20Crave.pdf

- **Ideas for non-food classroom rewards, by grade level:**

<http://www.svusd.k12.ca.us/healthykids/PDF/IdeasforRewards.pdf>

Sources:

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6. Public Health Law Center. (2011). *Sample school wellness policy language: no foods as a reward or punishment*. Retrieved online from <http://publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/ship-school%20policy%20language%20no%20food%20reward.pdf>

Smart Choices is a partnership of the Dakota County Public Health Department and school districts in Dakota County committed to making the healthy choice the easy choice by creating opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity before, during and after school.

Smart Choices is made possible by funding from the Minnesota Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP), and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota through the Center for Prevention. Blue Cross® and Blue Shield® of Minnesota is a nonprofit independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

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September 2014