



Healthy Non-food Rewards

Rewards happen at many levels across a school. Teachers, administrators and parent groups offer rewards to recognize and celebrate student accomplishments. The goal of rewarding students is to help them internalize desirable behaviors and create motivation for learning that comes from inside. The most effective rewards fit naturally into the context and mission of the school community and should promote healthy living as a desired value of the community.

ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS TIP SHEET

Non-material rewards involving recognition, privileges and opportunities for physical activity or other types of enrichment are powerful ways to help meet these goals. Material rewards such as school supplies, trinkets, toys and gift certificates can be donated by parents or provided by parent-teacher organizations for use on a more limited basis.

Elementary School Students

- Make deliveries to office
- Watch a fun movie
- Teach class
- Be a helper in another classroom
- Read morning announcements
- Sit with friends
- Have lunch or breakfast in the classroom
- Play a favorite game or do puzzles
- Extra recess time
- Show and tell
- Free time at the end of class
- Dance to music in the classroom
- Gift certificate to school store (non-food items)
- Walk with the principal or teacher
- Fun physical activity break
- Teacher or volunteer reads special book to class
- Certificate, trophy, ribbon, plaque
- Listen to music or a book
- Read outdoors or have class outdoors
- Extra art, music or reading time
- Teacher performs special skill, e.g., singing, guitar playing, juggling
- Earn points or play money to spend on privileges or non-food items
- Commendation certificate or letter sent home to parents by teacher or principal
- Trip to treasure box filled with non-food items, e.g., stickers, pencils, erasers, bookmarks, school supplies
- Access to items that can only be used only on special occasions

Reward with Recognition!

Consider recognizing students during morning announcements, at a school assembly, on a photo recognition board or on the school's website. Most kids enjoy hearing their successes acknowledged in front of their peers. Don't underestimate the power of small, personalized efforts such as a phone call or email to a student's parents, a hand-written note commending the achievement or a certificate of recognition.

Middle School Students

- Choose partners for activities
- Sit with friends
- Listen to music while working at desk
- Reduced homework or "no homework" pass
- Extra credit
- Fun movie
- Brainteaser puzzles, group activities and games
- Earn points or play money for privileges or nonfood items
- Computer time
- Free choice time or chat break at end of class
- Assemblies
- Field trips
- Eat lunch outside or have class outside



Every kid healthy, active and ready to learn

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Healthy Non-Food Rewards



High School Students

- Extra credit
- Fun movie
- Reduced homework
- Late homework pass
- Donated coupons for music, movies or books
- Drawings for donated prizes
- Pep rally
- Recognition on morning announcements
- Tickets to school events, e.g., dances, sporting events

PTO/PTA Rewards

- Water bottles
- School-branded apparel
- Movie passes
- Special time with a teacher
- Active video games
- Pool party, hike or group trip to a kids fun place
- Raffle for bigger prizes, such as a bike, or a ride in a limo

Food Rewards

Food rewards contradict classroom lessons on nutrition, add empty calories to kids' diets and teach kids to eat when they're not hungry — setting the stage for unhealthy habits that can last a lifetime and contributing to the childhood obesity epidemic. One study found that every separate food-related practice (e.g., a food incentive or reward) that promotes low-nutrition foods in a school is associated with a 10% increase in students' body mass indexes (BMI).¹

Check your school's wellness policy or school improvement plan to see if they contain any guidelines or goals about healthy, non-food rewards. If they don't, find out what it would take to address this topic.

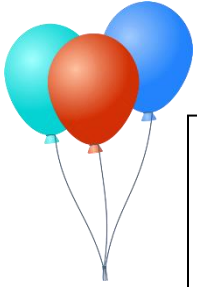
"Rewarding children with unhealthy foods in school undermines our efforts to teach them about good nutrition. It's like teaching children a lesson on the importance of not smoking, and then handing out ashtrays and lighters to the kids who did the best job listening."

-Marlene Schwartz, PhD, Co-Director
Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University

Action for Healthy Kids® is a nationwide grassroots network mobilizing school professionals, families and communities to take actions that improve school foods, nutrition education, physical activity and physical education for all students. Through funding opportunities, expert technical assistance, and our flagship program, Game On, Action for Healthy Kids supports schools in becoming healthier places where children thrive.



1: See ActionforHealthyKids.org/References



HEALTHY SCHOOL CELEBRATIONS

Offering so many treats so often can contribute to unhealthy eating habits. However, with a few easy changes, parents, teachers, and school administrators can shift the focus of school parties from unhealthy food to healthy fun

IDEAS FOR HEALTHIER CLASSROOM CELEBRATIONS

- ❖ Have a scavenger hunt for items or information in the classroom or around the school. Have children search for items related to the party theme.
- ❖ Provide "free choice" activity time at the end of the day.
- ❖ Provide extra recess time.
- ❖ Celebrate creatively by setting up craft stations and playing music in the background. Ask parents to provide the supplies such as clay, craft paper, pencils, markers, paints, and stickers.
- ❖ Plan special party games.
- ❖ Have a dance party.
- ❖ Read a children's book related to the party theme.
- ❖ Allow children a trip to the treasure box (parents can supply it with small toys, books, note pads, paints, etc).
- ❖ Allow children to pick a book of their choice and ask the principal or a parent to come in and read it.



BIRTHDAY PARTIES!

Keep in mind that each student's birthday can mean multiple celebrations: one at home with family, a party with friends, and then another at school. Food need not be part of school parties. Instead, find ways to recognize the child, celebrate them, and make them feel special.

Ways to celebrate a birthday & recognize a child on their special day:

- Make a sign, sash, crown, button, or badge for the birthday child
- Let the birthday child be the teacher's assistant for the day; they can do special tasks like make deliveries to the office or be the line leader
- Let the birthday child choose an activity or game
- Allow the student to pick a book and ask the principal or a parent to come and read it
- Play an indoor game of the student's choice

Healthy Snack Ideas



Purchased items with ingredient labels:

- Pretzels
- Yogurt
- Light Popcorn
- Low-fat Pudding
- Applesauce or fruit cups
- Whole Grain Tortilla Chips & Salsa
- Whole Grain Crackers & Low-Fat Cheese
- Hummus
- Commercially prepared Veggie or Fruit Trays
- Water Bottles
- Low Fat Milk
- 100% Fruit Juice

Check with your classroom teacher.

Constructive Classroom Rewards:

Promoting Good Habits While Protecting Children's Health

Rewarding children in the classroom need not involve candy and other foods that can undermine children's diets and health and reinforce unhealthful eating habits. A wide variety of alternative rewards can be used to provide positive reinforcement for children's behavior and academic performance.

"It's just a little treat": the harm in using food to reward children

Schools should not only teach children how to make healthy choices and to eat to fulfill nutritional needs, but also should provide an environment that fosters healthy eating. Providing food based on performance or behavior connects food to mood. This practice can encourage children to eat treats even when they are not hungry and can instill lifetime habits of rewarding or comforting themselves with food behaviors associated with unhealthy eating or obesity.

Awarding children food during class also reinforces eating outside of meal or snack times.

Since few studies have been conducted on the effect of using food rewards on children's long-term eating habits, **the best policy is not to use food to reward children for good behavior or academic performance. At minimum, children should not be rewarded using foods of poor nutritional quality.** (Note: classroom parties are covered by this policy.)

The value of rewarding children (with non-food rewards)

As teachers know, classroom rewards can be an effective way to encourage positive behavior. Children, like everyone, alter their actions based on short-term anticipated consequences. When trying to foster a new behavior, it is important to reward a child consistently each time he or she does the desired behavior. Once the behavior has become an established habit, rewards can be given every now and then to encourage the child to maintain the preferred behavior.

The ultimate goal of rewarding children is to help them internalize positive behaviors so that they will not need a reward. Eventually, self-motivation will be sufficient to induce them to perform the desired behavior, and outside reinforcement will no longer be necessary.

Physical activity and food should not be linked to punishment

Punishing children by taking away recess or physical education classes reduces their already-scarce opportunities for physical activity. Another counter-productive punishment is forcing children to do physical activity such as running laps or pushups. Children often learn to dislike things that are used as punishment s. Thus, penalizing children with physical activity might lead them to avoid activities that are important for maintaining wellness and a healthy body weight. In addition, food should not be withheld as a means of punishing children. The U.S. Department of Agriculture prohibits withholding meals as a punishment for any child enrolled in a school participating in the school meal programs.¹

Examples of beneficial (and inexpensive) rewards for children²

- **Social rewards**

“Social rewards,” which involve attention, praise, or thanks, are often more highly valued by children than a toy or food. Simple gestures like pats on the shoulder, verbal praise (including in front of others), nods, or smiles can mean a lot. These types of social rewards affirm a child's worth as a person.

- **Recognition**

- Trophy, plaque, ribbon, or certificate in recognition of achievement or a sticker with an affirming message (e.g., “Great job”)
- Recognizing a child's achievement on the school-wide morning announcements and/or the school's website
- A photo recognition board in a prominent location in the school
- A phone call, email, or letter sent home to parents or guardians commending a child's accomplishment
- A note from the teacher to the student commending his or her achievement

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). *Prohibition against Denying Meals and Milk to Children as a Disciplinary Action*. Alexandria, VA: USDA, 1988.

² Some examples adapted from “Alternatives to Using Food as a Reward,” Michigan Team Nutrition (a partnership between the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan State University Extension), 2004. Accessed at < <http://www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu/foodrewards.pdf>> on November 8, 2004

- **Privileges**

- Going first
- Choosing a class activity
- Helping the teacher
- Having an extra few minutes of recess with a friend
- Sitting by friends or in a special seat next to or at the teacher's desk
- "No homework" pass
- Teaching the class
- Playing an educational computer or other game
- Reading to a younger class
- Making deliveries to the office
- Reading the school-wide morning announcements
- Helping in another classroom
- Eating lunch with a teacher or principal
- Listening with a headset to a book on tape or CD
- Going to the library to select a book to read
- Working at the school store
- Taking a walk with the principal or teacher
- Designing a class or hall bulletin board
- Writing or drawing on the blackboard/whiteboard
- Taking care of the class animal for a day
- Allowing a child to choose an extra recess activity for the class on his/her birthday.

- **Rewards for a class**

- Extra recess
- Eating lunch outdoors
- Going to the lunchroom first
- Reading outdoors
- Holding class outdoors
- Extra art, music, PE, or reading time
- Listening to music while working
- Dancing to music
- Playing a game or doing a puzzle together
- "Free choice" time at the end of the day
- A song, dance, or performance by the teacher or students
- A book read aloud to the class by the teacher
- A field trip

- **School supplies**

- Pencils: colored, with logos, or other decorations
- Pens
- Erasers
- Notepads/notebooks
- Boxes of crayons
- Stencils
- Plastic scissors
- Stamps
- Gift certificate to the school store
- Bookmarks
- Highlighters
- Chalk (e.g., sidewalk chalk)
- Markers
- Coloring Books
- Rulers
- Glitter
- Pencil Sharpeners
- Books

- **Sports equipment and athletic gear**

- Paddleballs
- Frisbees
- Water bottles
- NERF balls
- Hula hoop
- Head and wrist sweat bands
- Jump rope

- **Toys/trinkets**

- Stickers
- Yo-yos
- Rubber balls
- Finger puppets
- Stuffed animals
- Plastic or rubber figurines
- Toy cars, trucks, helicopters, or airplanes
- Plastic sliding puzzles or other puzzle games
- Slinkies
- Gliders
- Magnifying glasses
- Spinning tops
- Marbles
- Jacks
- Playing cards
- Stretchy animals
- Silly putty
- Bubble fluid with wand
- Balloons
- Capsules that become sponges/figures when placed in water
- Inflatable toys (balls, animals)
- Small dolls or action figures

- **Fashion wear**

- Temporary tattoos
- Hair accessories (barrettes, elastics, or ribbons)
- Bracelets, rings, necklaces
- Sunglasses
- Eyeglasses with nose disguise
- Hat or cap
- T-shirt
- Sneaker bumper stickers
- Shoe laces

- **Miscellaneous**

- Key chains
- Flashlights
- Magnets
- Crazy Straws
- Books
- Cups

- **A token or point system**, whereby children earn points that accumulate toward a bigger prize. Possible prizes include those listed above and:

- Gift certificate to a bookstore or sporting goods store
- Movie pass or rental gift certificate
- Ticket to sporting event
- Puzzle
- Book

Stuffed animal

- Magazine subscription
- Board game
- Step counter (pedometer)
- Sports equipment, such as tennis racket, baseball glove, soccer ball, or basketball

Children can be given fake money, tokens, stars, or a chart can be used to keep track of the points they have earned. Points can be exchanged for privileges or prizes when enough are accumulated.

A point system also may be used for an entire class to earn a reward. Whenever individual children have done well, points can be added to the entire class's "account." When the class has earned a target number of points, then they receive a group reward.

*For more information, visit www.cspinet.org/schoolfood/
or contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest
at <nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org>.*