

Nonfood Rewards

Promoting healthy school environments



Many teachers and staff use food to influence student behavior. Yet, using food as a reward has many negative consequences.

When you reward children with food, it...



Undermines nutrition education by encouraging the consumption of food in the absence of hunger.¹



Affects dietary preferences by increasing the appeal of foods that were used as rewards.²⁻⁶



Contributes to unhealthy eating habits by encouraging children to reward themselves with food, which can contribute to disordered eating.^{2,7}



Leading professional organizations including the American Academy of Pediatrics, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and American Psychological Association all state that food should not be used as a reward.

The UConn Rudd Center recommends the following based on their research:

- Make it easy for school staff to find **alternative rewards** to address student behavior
- **Revise the district wellness policy** to prohibit food rewards so that everyone understands
- **Educate school staff** on the negative consequences of using food as a reward

Check out our list of alternatives to food rewards on the next page.

See the resources below for additional information on non-food rewards and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child approach to student health.



For more information, visit:
UConnRuddCenter.org

Resources

1. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child*.](#)
2. [UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health. *WSCC: Think about the Link project*.](#)
3. [Intervention Central. *Jackpot reward finder*.](#)
4. [Action for Healthy Kids. *Healthy and active non-food rewards*.](#)
5. [Alliance for a Healthier Generation. *Non-food rewards*.](#)



Alternatives to food rewards



Here are some ideas for material and non-material rewards. Choose rewards that work for your school or classroom context, adapt the ideas listed here, or develop your own non-food rewards.

Elementary School Students

Kids love physical activity

- Fun physical activity or dance break
- Extra recess time
- Walk with the principal or teacher

Special activities bring extra fun to the day

- Free time during class
- Sit with friends
- Fun movie
- Teacher performs a special skill or reads to class
- Listen to music or an audiobook
- Read outdoors or have class outdoors
- Extra art, music, or reading time
- Access to items that can only be used on special occasions, e.g., special art supplies, games, toys
- Have lunch in the classroom with a friend

Extra responsibilities make kids feel important

- Make deliveries to the office
- Help teach class
- Be a classroom helper
- Read morning announcements

Non-food prizes are also effective

- Trip to a treasure box filled with nonfood items, e.g., stickers, pencils, bookmarks, school supplies
- Gift certificate to school store (nonfood items)
- Earn points for privileges or nonfood items

Don't underestimate the power of praise!

- Verbal praise
- Certificate, trophy, ribbon, plaque
- Commendation certificate or letter sent to parents

Middle/High School Students

Teens love social opportunities

- Choose partners for activities
- Free choice time or chat break during class

Small breaks can be big motivators

- Listen to music while working
- Movie or computer time
- Eat lunch outside or have class outside
- Brainteaser puzzles or games

Academic rewards for extra work

- Late homework pass
- Extra credit

Reward the whole class

- Assemblies or pep rallies
- Field trips

Prizes don't have to be expensive

- Donated coupons for music or movies
- Drawings for donated prizes
- Tickets to school events, e.g., dances
- Earn points/tokens for non-food rewards

Teens appreciate recognition, too!

- Verbal praise
- Recognition on daily announcements

The key to healthy rewards is to find an incentive that is reinforcing to the intended students.



REFERENCES

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- 2 Birch, L.L. (1999). Development of food preferences. *Annual Review of Nutrition*, 19, 41-62. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.nutr.19.1.41>
- 3 Fedewa, A.L. and Davis, M.C. (2015). How food as a reward is detrimental to children's health, learning, and behavior. *Journal of School Health*, 85, 648-658. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12294>
- 4 Kröller, K., & Warschburger, P. (2008). Associations between maternal feeding style and food intake of children with a higher risk for overweight. *Appetite*, 51(1), 166-172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2008.01.012>
- 5 Lu, J., Laurette Dubé, Arora, N., & Xiong, S. (2015). Using food as reinforcer to shape children's non-food behavior: The adverse nutritional effect doubly moderated by reward sensitivity and gender. *Eating Behaviors*, 19, 94-97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2015.07.003>
- 6 Rollins, B. Y., Loken, E., Savage, J. S., & Birch, L. L. (2014). Measurement of food reinforcement in preschool children. Associations with food intake, BMI, and reward sensitivity. *Appetite*, 72, 21-27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2013.09.018>
- 7 Puhl, R. & Schwartz, M.B. (2003). If you are good you can have a cookie: How memories of childhood food rules link to adult eating behaviors. *Eating Behaviors*, 4, 283-293. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1471-0153\(03\)00024-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1471-0153(03)00024-2)