

# ALTERNATIVES TO FOOD REWARDS



## *Promoting a Healthy School Environment*

Food is commonly used to reward students for good behavior and academic performance. It's an easy, inexpensive and powerful tool to bring about immediate short-term behavior change. Yet, using food as reward has many negative consequences that go far beyond the short-term benefits of good behavior or performance.

Research clearly demonstrates that healthy kids learn better. To provide the best possible learning environment for children, schools must provide an environment that supports healthy behaviors. Students need to receive consistent, reliable health information and ample opportunity to use it. Finding alternatives to food rewards is an important part of providing a healthy school environment.

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*"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., Deputy Director, Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University

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## Consequences of Using Food Rewards

- ▶ **Compromises Classroom Learning:** Schools are designed to teach and model appropriate behaviors and skills to children. Nutrition principles taught in the classroom are meaningless if they are contradicted by rewarding children with candy and other sweets. It's like saying, *"You need to eat healthy foods to feel and do your best, but when you behave or perform your best, you will be rewarded with unhealthy food."* Classroom learning about nutrition remains strictly theoretical if schools regularly model unhealthy behaviors.
- ▶ **Contributes to Poor Health:** Foods commonly used as rewards, like candy and cookies, can contribute to health problems for children, such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension and cavities. Food rewards provide unneeded calories and displace healthier food choices.
- ▶ **Encourages Overconsumption of Unhealthy Foods:** Foods used as rewards are typically high in fat, added sugars and sodium with little nutritional value. Decreasing the availability of these foods is one strategy schools can use to address the current childhood obesity epidemic.



- ▶ **Contributes to Poor Eating Habits:** Rewarding with food can interfere with children learning to eat in response to hunger and satiety cues. This teaches kids to eat when they are not hungry as a reward to themselves, and may contribute to the development of disordered eating.<sup>1,2</sup>
- ▶ **Increases Preference for Sweets:** Food preferences for both sweet and non-sweet foods increase significantly when foods are presented as rewards. This can teach children to prefer unhealthy foods.<sup>2,3</sup>

### Children's Eating Habits are Poor

Currently, 17 percent of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are overweight and 1 in 3 children are overweight or obese.<sup>4</sup> Between 1980 and 2004, obesity tripled among children and adolescents.<sup>5</sup> Children ages 2 to 18 consume almost 40 percent of their calories from solid fats and added sugars.<sup>6</sup> Their diets do not include enough fruits and vegetables (particularly dark green and orange vegetables and legumes), whole grains or calcium-rich foods, and are too high in sodium, saturated fat and added sugars.<sup>7</sup> Poor eating habits that contribute to health problems tend to be established early in life, and unhealthy habits are usually maintained as children age. Obese children have increased risk for diseases in adulthood, such as diabetes and heart disease, and they often become obese adults.<sup>8,9</sup>

# IDEAS FOR ALTERNATIVES TO FOOD REWARDS

Schools can help promote a healthy learning environment by using nonfood rewards. The ideas below are just a beginning and can be modified for different ages. Be creative and don't forget the simple motivation of recognizing students for good work or behavior.

## Elementary School Students

- ▶ Make deliveries to office
- ▶ Teach class
- ▶ Be a helper in another classroom
- ▶ Read morning announcements
- ▶ Sit with friends
- ▶ Have lunch or breakfast in the classroom
- ▶ Have a private lunch in the classroom with a friend
- ▶ Play a favorite game or do puzzles
- ▶ Extra recess time
- ▶ Free time at the end of class
- ▶ Dance to music in the classroom
- ▶ Walk with the principal or teacher
- ▶ Fun physical activity break
- ▶ Trip to treasure box filled with nonfood items, e.g., stickers, pencils, erasers, bookmarks, school supplies
- ▶ Teacher or volunteer reads special book to class
- ▶ Fun movie
- ▶ Certificate, trophy, ribbon, plaque
- ▶ Teacher performs special skill, e.g., singing, guitar playing
- ▶ Listen to music or a book on audiotape
- ▶ 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, computer games, toys
- ▶ Gift certificate to school store (nonfood items)
- ▶ Commendation certificate or letter sent home to parents



- ▶ Show-and-tell
- ▶ Earn points or play money for privileges or nonfood items

## Middle School Students

- ▶ Sit with friends
- ▶ Choose partners for activities
- ▶ 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

## High School Students

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

## Resources

*Action Guide for School Nutrition and Physical Activity Policies.* Connecticut State Department of Education, 2006 (Revised 2009).

<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2678&q=322436>

*Healthy School Environment Resource List.* Connecticut State Department of Education.

[http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Nutrition/hse\\_resource\\_list.pdf](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Nutrition/hse_resource_list.pdf)

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Puhl, R. & Schwartz, M.B. (2003). If you are good you can have a cookie: The link between childhood food rules and adult eating behaviors. *Eating Behaviors*, 4: 283-293.
- <sup>2</sup> Birch, L.L. Development of Food Preferences (1999). *Annual Review of Nutrition*, 19:41-62.
- <sup>3</sup> Fisher, J. & Birch, L.L. Restricting access to palatable foods affects children's behavioral response, food selection and intake. (1999). *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 69:1264-72.
- <sup>4</sup> Ogden, C.L., Carroll, M.D., Curtin, L.R., Lamb, M.M., & Flegal, K.M. (2010). Prevalence of high body mass index in US children and adolescents, 2007-2008. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 303(3):242-249.
- <sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. (2006). *Prevalence of Overweight Among Children and Adolescents: United States, 2003-2004*. Retrieved on October 6, 2011 from [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/overweight/overweight\\_child\\_03.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/overweight/overweight_child_03.htm).
- <sup>6</sup> Reedy, J., & Krebs-Smith, S.M. (2010). Dietary Sources of Energy, Solid Fats, and Added Sugars among Children and Adolescents in the United States. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 110 (10):1477-1484
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. (2009). The quality of children's diets in 2003-04 as measured by the Healthy Eating Index – 2005. *Nutrition Insights*, 43. Retrieved on October 6, 2011 from <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/NutritionInsights/Insight43.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> Serdula, M.K., Ivery, D., Coates, R.J., Freedman, D.S., Williamson, D.F., & Byers, T. (1993). Do obese children become obese adults? A review of the literature. *Preventive Medicine*, 22(2):167-177.
- <sup>9</sup> Berenson, G.S., Srinivasan, S.R., Bao, W., Newman, W.P., Tracy, R.E., & Wattigney, W.A. (1998). Association between multiple cardiovascular risk factors and atherosclerosis in children and young adults. The Bogalusa Heart Study. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 338(23):1650-1656.



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