



# Everyone Loves Rewards: Fun Alternatives to Food A Guide for Parents and Teachers

Fact Sheet FS1063



## Cooperative Extension

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH SCIENCES

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Everyone loves getting rewards for a job well done or a special achievement. What do you like to give for rewards? Is it a ribbon at the science fair or a medal for the soccer tournament or an ice cream sundae after scoring high on a test? Many times we use food or beverage as a reward. Food used for rewards are often high in sugar and/or fat, low in nutrients and high in calories. While using food once in a while is fine, using it all the time can add unwanted pounds. Physical activity does burn calories, but usually we eat more calories than we use. For example, 1/2 cup of vanilla ice cream with 2 tablespoons of chocolate sauce has about 246 calories<sup>1</sup>. A person would have to walk for 1 hour and 15 minutes at a moderate pace (3 miles per hour) to use up those calories<sup>2</sup>. Another problem with sugary food or beverages is that sugar causes tooth decay unless you brush often. A healthier alternative is to use non-food rewards.

- Older children and teens can delay their gratification, so you can wait to give a reward or let them accumulate “points” towards the reward. One technique is to use a chart system, where you earn a star for doing something and after you earn 10 or more stars you get the reward.
- A popular reward is just spending more time with mom, dad or siblings doing fun things, such as a board game, taking a walk, playing catch, reading a story, building with Legos®, etc. You open the door for conversation and create lasting memories.
- Most child development experts say to avoid using money for rewards. Many things like cleaning one’s room, getting good grades, or feeding a pet should happen because it benefits the family or personal goals, not because you’re paid to do it. It also gets expensive.

### Tips for Giving Rewards

- Rewards should match the age, interests and abilities of the child.
- A smile, hug, kiss or words of praise are often enough reward. Use them frequently and sincerely. “Wow, you worked hard on that project. I’m proud of you!”
- Rewards for young children (under 5) are best given at the time the behavior or event occurs. Young children cannot wait for reinforcement.

### Reward Ideas for Families

**Children under 5:** (Be sure item is safe & appropriate for the age of your child)

- A homemade or purchased card
- Stickers
- Let the child pick the family-time story or movie
- Mylar balloons (latex ones can be choking hazard)
- Modeling compound, clay
- Small stuffed animals
- Sidewalk chalk
- Large crayons or markers

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**Children 5 to 12:** (Be sure item is safe & appropriate for the age of your child)

- A homemade or purchased card. Add some confetti for fun.
- Notes of congratulations or encouragement on mirrors, on pillows, in lunch bags, or on the door
- A star on the door or refrigerator with their name & accomplishment
- Let the child pick the family-time story, movie or TV show.
- Small plastic balls, animals, insects or other toys
- Inflated balloons
- Marbles
- Trading cards (1 or 2 at time)
- Use a special plate or glass at a meal for your "star." (Party stores have plastic gold plates.)
- Inexpensive jewelry
- Temporary tattoos
- Lip balm & sample size lotions
- Stickers & temporary tattoos
- Notepads
- Modeling compound, clay or other stretchy, gooey stuff
- Pencils, pens, chalk, & markers
- Art supplies
- Pay for downloading 1 or 2 songs
- Bigger prizes earned over time or for major achievement:
  - o Purchase of a magazine or book
  - o A book from the library, rent or purchase a CD, DVD, video or electronic game
  - o Trip to movies or other favorite spot (park, mall, arcade, beach)
  - o Toy or game
  - o Clothing



**Teens:**

- Cards or notes
- Magnets for lockers
- Pencils, pens & markers
- Pay for downloading 1 or 2 songs
- Inexpensive jewelry

- Inexpensive or travel size make-up, nail polish or lotions
- Use a special plate or glass at meals for your shining star (Party stores have plastic gold plates.)
- Use a sign, balloon or banner for the family to see. (Be careful not to embarrass them in front of their friends.)
- Bigger prizes earned over time or for major achievement:
  - o Purchase a magazine or book
  - o Borrow from the library, rent or purchase a CD, DVD, video or electronic game
  - o Trip to movies or other favorite spot (mall, park, arcade, beach)
  - o Clothing

## Reward Ideas for Teachers

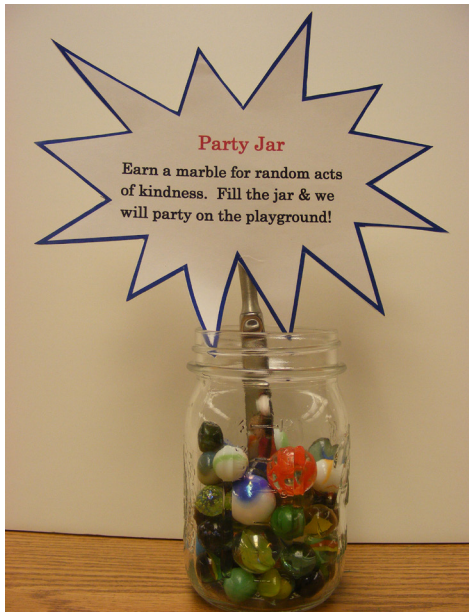
Find something you can reward each student for during the month or semester such as improvement in grades, helping another student or showing a kindness to others. Everyone wants to feel special. You may be surprised by the positive results from regular praise or other reward.

**Preschool:**

- Stickers or stamps on papers
- Award winners pick the story of the day or lead the line to the playground
- Homemade or purchased certificates or ribbons
- Inexpensive medals to wear
- Celebrate with noisemakers, confetti or streamers
- A special hat or crown to wear (kindness hat or "best listener" crown)
- A Shining Stars bulletin board. Each star has the accomplishment & photo of the child.

**Elementary School:**

- Celebration jar – deposit one or more marbles or beans for individual or group good behavior, kindness or achievements. When jar is full, hold a party.
- Behavior charts with stars and long-term rewards
- Stickers or stamps on papers or to take home
- Temporary tattoos
- Fun erasers
- Homemade or purchased certificates or ribbons
- Inexpensive medals to wear
- Small plastic balls, critters, or other toys.
- Shining Stars or Wall of Fame bulletin board. Display certificates of achievement with photos of students.
- Pencils, pens, or marker



### Middle and High Schools:

- Notes or cards
- Celebration jar (see above)
- Email or mail home congratulatory notes to parents or guardians. (Too often parents only hear about the bad stuff.)
- Stickers or stamps on papers
- Homemade or purchased certificates or ribbons
- Pencils, pens, or markers
- Create individual student or class charts. Fill with stars for a prize or privilege.
- Wall of Fame bulletin board

### When Food is Part of the Reward

Celebrations and food go together, so make the party healthier by including nutritious choices alongside higher calorie options. For example, provide fruit along with cake and always offer water to drink. Get the party guests moving with active games or dancing. Find more ideas on the RCE fact sheet FS1049, "Let's Eat! Healthier Snacks and Parties: A guide for organizations, schools and families." ([njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pid=FS1049](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pid=FS1049))

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### Websites for More Information



Grow Healthy [njaes.rutgers.edu/growhealthy](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/growhealthy)



Get Moving - Get Healthy New Jersey  
[getmovinggethealthynj.rutgers.edu](http://getmovinggethealthynj.rutgers.edu)

Family and Community Health Sciences  
[njaes.rutgers.edu/fchs](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/fchs)

### Notes:

1. USDA National Nutrient Database website, [ndb.nal.usda.gov](http://ndb.nal.usda.gov), accessed 3/14/2013.
2. Calories burned based on 130 pound person. NutriStrategy Nutrition and Fitness website, [nutrstrategy.com](http://nutrstrategy.com), accessed 3/14/2013.