

# Using Praise and Rewards at Home



Parents use praise and rewards to help teach children new behaviors and to maintain or strengthen existing ones. There are other important reasons, however, to use praise and rewards (Bear, 2010, 2013; Brophy, 1981). In part, they help to build positive relationships between child and parent using and receiving praise and reward. The most effective parents use praise often — and rewards more occasionally — to demonstrate warmth, care, and support.

By using praise and rewards wisely and strategically, following recommendations in this handout, adults instead “catch children being good” and place the emphasis on Children’s use of desirable, socially important behaviors. This approach helps children understand what they *should* do and *why* (versus simply what they *shouldn’t* do) and fosters more pleasant home environment for everyone.

**Praise:** typically follows a desired behavior and occurs in a natural, spontaneous manner. That is, children are not told that they have to earn praise. Further, they seldom tire of being praised, especially when it is provided in a variety of ways.

**Rewards:** refer to tangible objects (e.g., sticker, toy, or snack) and to preferred activities and privileges (e.g., extra recess, free time, or screen time). Although rewards can — and sometimes should — be given spontaneously, they are more often used in a planned or contrived manner. The case for or against rewards is complex, but in general, research shows that under *certain* conditions, rewards may harm intrinsic motivation and promote extrinsic motivation (Bear, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

- **Intrinsic motivation:** a behavior occurs because the child enjoys it, values it, and chooses it without pressure to do so.
  - Conditions that affect intrinsic motivation:
    - occurs when the child perceives adults as controlling or manipulating their behavior with the promise of rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2017).
    - Is when adults compare children to each other
  - Conditions that harm intrinsic motivation:
    - children can develop self-centered moral reasoning, which is a belief that people only act for personal gain or to avoid punishment
    - Children — especially adolescents — rebel against constant control or comparison to others. This may hurt the adult’s relationship with the student or lead to more significant misbehaviors.
- **Extrinsic motivation:** external forces (including rewards or the fear of punishment) drive a behavior. That is, the child exhibits the behavior only or primarily when a reward or punishment is expected

## **IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF PRAISE AND REWARDS**

**Student Preferences:** The effectiveness of praise and rewards varies from child to child, both across and within age groups, and depends on individual preferences, especially with rewards. If a reward is of little interest to the child, it's unlikely to have much effect, especially on increasing a behavior among children who lack self-motivation.

**Appropriate Implementation of Praise and Rewards:** When an adult respond to a tantrum by meeting a child's demands, the negative behavior is rewarded, and thus strengthened. The use of praise and rewards can range from simple or general practices to complex interventions. It is important to implement the right level of praise and rewards, so adults need to adjust their use based on situational factors.

### **Positive Ways to Use of Praise and Rewards**

- 1. Use praise and rewards more than punishment.** Focus on teaching and reinforcing desired behaviors rather than on punishing undesired ones.
- 2. Use praise more than rewards.** Praise has several advantages over rewards. It occurs more naturally in most environments and is easier to use. It requires no cost and little time. Children students rarely view praise as a way that adults attempt to control or manipulate their behavior.
- 3. Be sincere and credible.** When children trust or respect the parent, the praise is more likely to be accepted and internalized.
- 4. Use frequent, immediate praise and rewards to teach a new behavior or to increase a behavior that seldom occurs.** Provide feedback to the child as soon as the desired behavior occurs — and to do so often. This helps the child recognize the importance of the behavior; it also helps the child feel successful, thus building competency. Frequent and immediate praise and rewards are especially important for young children and other students whose cognitive or social – emotional functioning is at the preschool or early elementary level.
- 5. Provide less praise and fewer rewards when a behavior is more established.** Praise and rewards remain most effective if they are provided intermittently, where the length of time between them can be increased as the behavior strengthens, a process called fading. The purpose of fading is to reduce dependency on the praise or reward. The rate of decreasing rewards is important. Try not to decrease the praise or rewards too quickly or too slowly. If it occurs too quickly, the behavior may never be truly learned or reinforced. If it occurs too slowly, the child may become too dependent on extrinsic means of motivation. In addition, even though you may not continue to use rewards, it is important to always use *some* level of praise with children.
- 6. Set appropriate and realistic goals.** The levels at which praise or rewards are given to the child for meeting expectations should be neither too low *nor* too high. If the threshold for positive feedback is set too low, you may convey that you do not believe the child is capable of something more. Goals can also be readjusted as the student begins to display the desired behavior more frequently.

- 7. Don't praise and reward poor effort or performance.** Praising or rewarding poor effort or performance may reinforce it. Praising or rewarding at these times can communicate low expectations, thus affecting a child's confidence. In addition, if children recognize that they did not do well, they may view the positive feedback as disingenuous.
- 8. Mix it up! Use different types of praise and rewards.** Be creative — children enjoy novelty and surprise. Using the same forms of praise and rewards over and over can cause them to become stale and ineffective.
- 9. Highlight the student's specific skills or achievement—and especially the effort demonstrated.** Use praise or rewards to affirm something concrete and avoid using only general statements (e.g., "Good job!"). Children thus understand what he or she did well, which helps develop more accurate self-awareness and self-assessment skills and increases the child's ability to replicate success. The child may be less dismissive of praise or rewards when adults give specific feedback.
- 10. Encourage others to praise and reward the behavior.** Receiving praise or rewards from different people can help the child to internalize and generalize behavior more quickly.
- 11. Provide praise and rewards across settings, when appropriate.** If you expect a behavior to occur in multiple settings, make sure feedback is provided in all of them to the extent possible.
- 12. Encourage students to praise and reward themselves.** This technique fosters a child's self-management skills and a sense of pride in his or her own behavior.
- 13. Use rewards that the student desires.** Parents should ensure that the reward is something the child likes, values, and wants to earn. The reward needs to help motivate the child. Make an effort to identify and design rewards based on individual preferences. A reward menu, which lists a number of different items the student can earn, may help. Adding choice increases the chance of finding an effective reward and allows the child to feel more in control.



## Helpful Ways to Avoid Extrinsic Motivation

- 1. Use rewards to provide positive feedback, not to control student behavior.** Use as a way to provide students with recognition in a positive and supportive manner. A reward—or the withholding of one—should not be used as a way to bribe, threaten, or control children.
- 2. Use the fewest rewards necessary to maintain the desired behavior.** If the child is already displaying a behavior, then using rewards too often—especially in a controlling manner—may decrease intrinsic motivation and promote self-centered moral reasoning.
- 3. Use rewards in surprising ways.** Children who are not expecting a reward for meeting expectations — they are not told beforehand that it will happen — will not be focused solely on earning a reward. This condition in turn decreases the perception of potentially being controlled and discourages extrinsic motivation.
- 4. Emphasize the value or usefulness of the behavior, both presently and in the future.** This helps the child understand how one's behavior positively affects oneself and others, whether academically or socially. In addition, when the child recognizes the natural benefits of a particular behavior, it promotes higher levels of intrinsic motivation and moral development. It also helps the child develop confidence to continue to act appropriately.
- 5. Do not teach the student that the most important reason for the behavior is to get a reward (or to avoid punishment).** This helps avoid the lowest level of moral reasoning. Instead, focus on other reasons for the behavior and recognize the thoughts, emotions, and dispositions that underlie good behavior, such as feelings of pride, empathy, responsibility, caring, and kindness.

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES - Websites (Copy and paste links into preferred browser)

Intervention Central has practical **strategies**, including forms and checklists, for Teachers regarding the use of rewards. <https://www.interventioncentral.org/>

This website provides a list of rewards that can be used at home

<https://habyts.com/>

This website provides a number of ways to replace the phrase “good job.”

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/10/5f/31/105f31d35c95bc843af137c0c79b5bf0.jpg>