

USING REWARDS

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Be more positive. ADHD children receive far more negative feedback than other children. Positive verbal feedback helps maintain an ADHD child's self-esteem and is a critical element of any teaching or parenting process.

Vary rewards. Since ADHD children tend to lose interest and get bored quickly, it is important to vary the rewards and reward systems you use. A reward menu is particularly helpful since it gives the child an opportunity to choose among different reward options.

Don't overexcite. ADHD children can get overexcited by the prospect of earning or achieving a reward. Choose rewards that interest the children but be wary of reward options that are so stimulating that they make it hard for the children to stay under control.

Be clear. Rewards and positive feedback give children more information about their behavior. We should be clear about why we are providing reinforcement. It is important to identify the skills, attitudes and plans we see in the children that enable them to achieve goals and earn the rewards. When communicating between home and school, a picture system may be helpful to depict what the children are doing well at school.

Make a connection. Make a connection between behavior and consequences. A youngster who helps out their mom and dad may find that their parent has more time to devote to them. A child who cleans their room may be helped to buy something for their bedroom wall. A student who does a good job completing his homework may receive a "homework pass." Children who are kind to siblings will have parents who are more willing to grant privileges. The more natural and logical the connection between the ADHD child's behavior and the positive consequence, the better.

Be Wary of Artificial Rewards. If there is not a logical connection between the behavior and the reward, we risk undermining a child's internal motivation. Although sometimes external rewards are necessary, offering a child money for grades or gifts for reading may undermine the true importance of education. The same may be true when we offer money for chores or incentives for daily responsibilities.

First Things First. To motivate and reward ADHD children, make sure that the fun follows the responsibility. Generally, children should get dressed before they watch TV. or pick up in their room before they go out and play. They should help clear off the table before they have dessert and put on their pajamas before they hear a bedtime story.

Clear Stopping Points. ADHD children sometimes have trouble when they must stop having fun. If we are going to use rewards, make sure that the timelines and limits are clear. If not, we can create more problems than we solve.

Don't Threaten. Too often, we attempt to motivate children by threatening the loss of a reward. While this is sometimes effective and even necessary, this parenting pattern tends to discourage ADHD children and create a negative attitude.

Short Term Goals. ADHD children will lose interest if they don't make rapid progress towards their goals. Reward systems should be short term and readily achievable. If the children negotiate for a more significant goal/reward, it should be done in small steps or stages. If it takes weeks for a child to achieve the reward, they may get discouraged.

Be a Role Model. Choose goals and reward yourself. Make sure that the children see what you plan to accomplish and how you are using the reward as motivation.

Response Costs. Although reward systems can be very helpful, sometimes a response cost element is needed. Once the system is established, consider a response cost component where the children are "charged" a small amount for inappropriate behavior. If the costs consistently outweigh the credits, then the system needs to be modified.

Build in Motivators. It is often helpful to use posters or charts or other visual reminders of the goal and the reward, much the same as someone might keep a travel brochure when they are saving money for a vacation. If the children see the Blazer poster on the wall, they may work harder to earn their ticket to the game.

Reminders for Parents. Despite our best intentions, we forget to compliment our children and we don't always follow through with the reward systems we have started. Some parents use their digital watches to remind them to be more positive. Some use a physical reminder, such as marbles or poker chips in their pockets. Other families establish a routine that helps them to be more complimentary (e.g., positive feedback at the dinner table or at bath time or bedtime). Just like our children, we need to get in the habit of being more positive.

Reward Effort and Plans. Parents and teachers will usually compliment or reward behaviors that they are trying to encourage in their ADHD children. It is just as important to reward positive attitudes and the strategies you see the children using to be successful. Don't just compliment a child for doing their homework, praise them for getting started right away or choosing a good spot to do their work. If a child behaves well in a restaurant, talk about what they did to keep themselves busy or how enjoyable it was to hear them talk about their day.

Bonus Points. We will often provide "extra credits" if ADHD children can identify the things that we are proud of and want to reinforce. It is much more powerful when the children tell us what part of their room is organized or what chores they completed that afternoon or what they did to help their brother. Children who remind us

Children First. Parents often offer positive feedback without knowing how their child views his or her effort or performance. It is not always helpful to praise a child for an effort that the youngster considers mediocre.

Honesty. Don't compliment your child or reward behavior unless you are being genuine. Your child may sense when you are being dishonest, and this will undermine the value of your feedback.

Timing. For a young ADHD child, it is important to offer more immediate feedback and rewards. For older children, the timing may not be so critical if the connections between goals and consequences are clear.

Teach Skills. Reward systems do not teach skills. All the positive feedback in the world will not help you be a better golfer or a better cook if you don't know how to hold a golf club or read a recipe. Offering rewards, when a child does not have the ability to be successful, can be discouraging and undermine a child's confidence and self-esteem.

Group Rewards. It sometimes helps to develop a reward or incentive system that includes a group of children. An ADHD child's self-esteem can be enhanced if they can contribute positively towards a group goal and when other children see that they can earn credits for the group. When using a group goal system, start first with goals that are easily achieved by the ADHD child. If children share in the goal and the reward, they are motivated to see each other succeed.

"Marble in a Jar." One of the most useful reward systems uses a "marble in a jar" concept. As an ADHD child works towards their goal, we put a marble or poker chip or some other type of token in an unbreakable container. When the jar is full the children earn their reward or celebration. In this way, the children can see themselves making progress towards their reward. Smaller containers are used for smaller goals/rewards. Some children will transfer their tokens to a bigger jar, towards a more significant reward. Parents help model the process by choosing their own goals/reward jar.

Time Bank. One of the flexible reward systems uses the concept of time. ADHD children who are cooperative or do their chores without extra help or complete their homework without hassles are saving us time. We keep track of the time they save us and "bank it" towards something fun that requires our time (e.g., going to a movie). This helps make the connection between the child's behavior or accomplishment and the privileges or opportunities that follow. Because the time can be used for many different things, this reward system is very flexible.