



PSYCH HACKS

Beyond Gold Stars: Seven Ways to Fix Behavioral Problems with Rewards

If you're like most parents, you've probably tried some kind of a reward system to get your child to do (or stop doing) something. From sticker charts to gold stars, maybe you've tried it all. Maybe it didn't work, or maybe it worked for a while but then stopped working. The truth is that positive reinforcement works beautifully to improve an array of disruptive behaviors in children. However, just like anything, there's a way to do it right, and there are many ways to do it wrong. Below are seven key ingredients to a reward system that actually works.

#1: Define the Targets

For a reward system to be effective, it is important to clearly and specifically define the target behaviors (i.e., what behaviors earn rewards). Most reward systems fail because the target behaviors are vague and unclear (e.g., "be good," "be nice," etc.). In clear, behavioral terms, "be good" could be defined as "follows instructions after the first request," and "be nice" could be defined as "shares toys with sibling." It is also recommended that target behaviors be defined in positive instead of negative terms (e.g., "uses inside voice" vs. "doesn't yell").



#2: The "Token"

If the defined behavior occurs frequently, it may be helpful to have "tokens" that can later be exchanged for predetermined rewards. "Tokens" can be stickers, poker chips, play-dollar-bills, or any other item that you think would easily engage your child. Ensure that the process of delivering the "token" is swift and easy. For example, having to peel off a sticker each time the target behavior occurs would be more time-intensive than tossing a poker chip in a jar.

#3: The “Price”

If using some form of “tokens,” the price refers to the number of “tokens” needed to exchange for a reward. Try to make it fairly easy at first for your child to earn the reward. Over time you can raise the price but making it easy in the beginning allows your child to learn the value of demonstrating positive behaviors.

#4: Powerful Rewards

If your child is like almost all other children, he or she will likely get tired of the same reward over time. Creating a “menu” of rewards helps prevent this from happening. It also helps to mix up the type of the rewards (e.g., food reward, electronic reward, activity-based reward, etc.)



#5: Fast and Furious

When first starting a reward system, it is important to reinforce your child every time they demonstrate the target behavior. You can fade the frequency of rewards over time but starting fast and furious helps establish a high rate of the behavior.

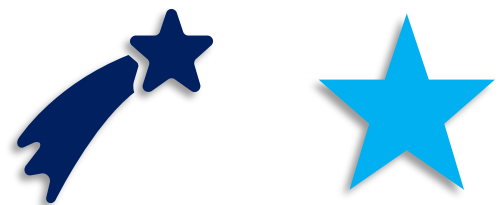


#6: Beware of Competitors

When creating the “menu” of rewards, ask yourself, “does my child have access to these things or similar things, regardless of whether they earn such access?” If the answer is “yes,” then the reward system will be ineffective. Try your best to make sure your child only has access to the identified rewards if and when they are earned.

#7: Size

Finally, one important thing to keep in mind is that big but less frequent rewards do not often work as well as smaller, more frequent rewards in changing behavior.



Promethean Psychology specializes in evidence-based mental health treatment for children, adolescents and young adults. To learn more visit www.prometheanpsychology.com