

Inside People: Children respond to the right rewards

by Lisa Reicosky

A Harvard professor recently questioned Pizza Hut's "Book It" incentive program used by 50,000 schools nationwide to reward young readers with free pizzas.

Students who meet reading goals get a certificate they can redeem at Pizza Hut for a free personal pan pizza.

The professor said it promotes bad eating habits and turns teachers into corporate promoters. Pizza Hut says it motivates students to read. Pizza aside, the questions that follow this debate are:

Do incentives work and what should those incentives be?

Should we reward children for doing what they should be doing anyway?

PRAISE TRUMPS CASH

Deborah Portner, a clinical counselor in Ashland, Ohio, who deals with self-esteem issues in children, says every child has a currency. But that doesn't necessarily mean cash and prizes.

"Reward and punishment is an age-old behavior modification technique and it's pretty successful," she said. "I'm all about raising self-esteem. That doesn't always come from a Game Boy game."

Instead, she said, simply saying to her three kids, ages 13, 11, and 9, "Thank you. I appreciate you for being a part of the Portner team," is an appropriate reward for doing something like putting away the toys or loading the dishwasher.

"I don't give rewards for being part of the family," she explained, adding, "They get rewarded sometimes for the extra things, like when the oldest baby-sits."

Affirmation and time, she said, are greater rewards than money and "Portner Family Fun Night" - a movie, popcorn and a board game - is a great way for her to reward teamwork in her family. Every now and then, she'll reward consistent good behavior with a surprise thank-you note and a \$10 gift card.

Rewards today, she believes, have lost value because children feel so entitled. If they are rewarded constantly with material items, they'll eventually come to expect bigger and better.

"I've learned through counseling children that consistent praise has a huge amount of value," Portner said.

BABY STEPS

For some parents, the reward for good behavior is praise until potty training time rolls around. This is often the first time a tangible reward system is put into place.

Sticker charts helped Melissa Blondheim of Lake Township, Ohio, get her first two children, now 7 and 6, potty trained. Each time they used the potty they'd get a sticker. After 10 stickers, they would get something small, like a lollipop. After 20, they'd get to pick out a small toy.

WANT A REWARD? - The 'My Rewards Game' is one way to engage your child in a behavior-reward system. The board hangs on the wall and the pieces are magnetic. CNS Photo.

WANTED: BETTER BEHAVIOR - If you're trying to change your children's behavior, remember that bribing is a quick hit. Rewarding tries to teach the bigger picture, experts say. CNS Illustration. This even worked for one child's bed-wetting problem. Although bed-wetting can't be controlled, Blondheim said she and her husband Greg realized it was more of a behavioral issue. They set goals for their son to stop drinking at a certain hour and made sure he used the bathroom before bed whether he felt like it or not.

The sticker system worked so well with her family, she's decided to give it a go with her ninth-grade "re-start" algebra class at Garfield High School in Akron, Ohio.

The biggest problem with the kids who didn't pass algebra on the first take, she said, is a failure to do homework. So she created a reward chart for turning in assignments. After five stickers, students get a piece of candy or a pencil. After three weeks, it may be a can of pop at lunch or a snack.

"It's amazing what a bag of chips will do," she said with a laugh.

She also plans to make homework a group effort as well. If 90 percent of the class does their homework for a given amount of time, they may get a pizza party or a movie day. Those who don't do the work will not participate. The key is moderation. You can't use it for everything," she said. "And it's a life lesson."

She hopes that in the end they see that doing homework results in a better grade, not just in getting a piece of candy.

"It's a way to set goals and eventually they see what comes with it," she said.

For those who consider this a bribe, she counters with this:

"Bribing is a quick hit. You'll get something for doing this now. Rewarding tries to teach the bigger picture."

Jennifer Plentovich of North Canton, Ohio, agrees. The mother of two sons is trying to get her 8-year-old to be a more consistent reader at home. She says rewards in her family are not an immediate thing.

"It's more of an accumulative reinforcement. If he consistently reads for a set amount of time, he's rewarded with a new book," she said. "We set goals and work toward them. If they ask for something special, we set a goal to get it."

SHOW ME THE MONEY

Karen Immel of Jackson Township, Ohio, wants her children to learn the value of money by earning it. Her challenge comes in deciding what jobs deserve payment.

"We're trying to get into allowances right now," she said of her four children ages 10, 8, 6, and 3.

She started giving them \$3 per week for doing things like hanging up their bookbags and coats after school, emptying their lunch boxes, and making their bed, among other chores.

"After all was said and done it worked fine for about a month. Then they started missing days and we weren't consistent with paying them if we didn't have change," she explained.

Then one day she asked one of her children why she didn't make her bed and the daughter replied, "You're not paying me."

"I said, 'No, no, no. You're part of this family,'" Immel said. "So now, we're trying to figure out the money thing and teaching them about responsibility."

One thing she's sure of, presenting the chore-equals-reward equation in a positive way is often more successful.

"I'll say, 'If you do this and go above and beyond, we'll go to the park.' I like to look at it this way instead of saying, 'If you don't clean your room, we won't go to the park,'" Immel said.

For now, Immel still expects the previously mentioned duties to be fulfilled by her children, but she only rewards actions that go beyond what is expected.

For example, second child, Rachel, recently cleaned out a shoe closet without being asked. She earned

money. But when 6-year-old Nathan wanted to vacuum the car, he earned some candy.

"It depends on the child what is a good reward," she said. "If I'd given Nathan a dollar, I would have found it in his pants pocket later. It doesn't mean anything to him yet."

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Portner said that whatever your philosophy on rewards for positive actions is, one thing remains important - consistency.

"Say what you mean and mean what you say," she said, "And see that it is important to follow up with your promises. If you say this is what you're going to get, you have to give it. Be careful not to promise too much. You are building trust."

SETTING UP THE GAME

A reward system works best in children over 2 and can take up to two months to work.

Choose a behavior you would like to change (such as bedtime habits, tooth brushing or picking up toys), then choose a reward your child would enjoy. Examples of good rewards are an extra bedtime story, delaying bedtime by half an hour, a preferred snack or, for older children, earning points toward a special toy, a privilege or a small amount of money.

Explain the desired behavior and the reward to the child. For example, "If you get into your pajamas and brush your teeth before this TV show is over, you can stay up a half hour later."

Request the behavior only one time. If the child does what you ask, give the reward. You can help the child if necessary but don't get too involved because any attention from parents, even negative attention, is so rewarding to children, they may prefer to have parental attention instead of a reward at first.

This system helps you avoid power struggles with your child. However, your child is not punished if he or she chooses not to behave as you ask; he or she simply does not get the reward.

- American Academy of Family Physicians.

CHARTING PROGRESS

Often, a simple calendar works as a way to chart positive behavior leading to the goal of a reward. An Internet search for reward charts will also give parents options for documenting progress.

The "My Rewards Game" is a playful way to engage your child in a behavior-reward system. Created by a mother of three, the game's rules are set by the parent. Good behavior moves the child forward in the game. Unacceptable behavior moves them back. At the end of the game, the child receives a predetermined reward.

The board hangs on the wall and the pieces are magnetic.

It sells for \$19.99. Check it out at www.myrewardsgame.us.

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