



Triple P

Positive Parenting Program



Ask Nicole: Using Rewards as a Teaching Tool

As a parent I know that sometimes we need to look for ways to motivate our children to do things like follow directions, get along with others, be more independent or do well in school. While we want to see a change in behavior, we also don't want to beg, use bribes, or spend money on expensive items every time we want our child to do the right thing. Many of us often hear conflicting advice: "rewards are necessary to motivate children" or "rewards prevent children from developing internal motivation and responsibility." It's confusing when those two viewpoints are presented as mutually exclusive. I've learned over the years that neither of those extremes is entirely true, but both contain valid points.

This monthly column provides tips for anyone who is helping raise children, based on the world-renowned Triple P – Positive Parenting Program, available to families in Santa Cruz County. If you have a question or idea for a future column, please email me at triplep@first5scc.org.

Dear Nicole,

My mom and I disagree about rewarding kids for good behavior. She thinks behavior charts and rewards are just a form of bribery, and that kids become dependent on getting rewards or people's approval instead of learning to "do the right thing." I use rewards with my young kids (4 and 6), and they seem fine. In fact, it seems to help them want to do better on their own. Who is right?

- Sandra

Dear Sandra,

You're both right. It's true that incentives can be overused or misused, to the point where they become ineffective. However, rewards are also a useful part of the "parenting toolkit," and in reality, are a part of everyday life. For example, I like getting a paycheck for working. Sometimes I need that external reward to motivate me when I'd rather be doing anything but work. At the same time, I like the satisfaction that comes from using my skills and abilities to make a positive difference. This internal reward keeps me motivated to do my best.

When used effectively, rewards and incentives can be useful tools that help children develop new skills, as well as their "internal compass" – the motivation, self-discipline and independence that will guide their behaviors and choices throughout life. Try these tips:

Identify a specific skill, habit or behavior that your child is working on. It might be a behavior that you'd like to see more of (sharing) or less of (hitting), or a skill that your child is developing – e.g. tying shoes, staying in bed at night or getting ready for school. Picking just one skill or behavior to work on at a time will help it feel achievable to your child and lead to greater success.

Set a specific, realistic goal. Keep the goal simple and reasonable for your child's age and abilities, especially if it's the first time your child will be working on it. Involve your children in setting the goal whenever possible so they are more invested





in the change. Make the goal progressively harder to reach as your child becomes more skilled or the new behavior becomes a habit.

Create a list of rewards or incentives that interest your child. Involve your child in selecting a reward for meeting the goal. Get creative – an extra story at bedtime, a sleepover with a friend, or picking the movie the family watches. Decide whether material rewards such as toys, food, video games or clothing are suitable and feasible in your family. If they are, try to find healthy options and use them sparingly or for harder-to-achieve goals.

Give descriptive praise and encouragement. Use descriptive praise to show your child you're noticing efforts and progress. Praise that is specific and genuine is often rewarding enough to encourage your child to do more of the same behavior.

Phase out the reward once your child has mastered the new skill or behavior. Continue giving descriptive praise. If needed, repeat the process of setting a goal, identifying a reward and encouraging your child's efforts.

Remember that it's your child's choice to work toward the reward or not. Rewards become ineffective if they are disguised threats or nagging – *"You're not going to earn your reward if you keep this up."* Once you've set the goal with your child and agreed on the reward to be earned, help your child figure out how to meet that goal and provide encouragement.

Final Thoughts: Whether and how to use rewards is a decision that each family must make based on what feels right for them. When used effectively, rewards can be a powerful tool for giving feedback and encouragement that make the process of learning a new skill or behavior rewarding in and of itself.

Nicole Young is the mother of two children, ages 11 and 15, who also manages Santa Cruz County's Triple P - Positive Parenting Program, the world's leading positive parenting program. Scientifically proven, Triple P is made available locally by First 5 Santa Cruz County, the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency (Mental Health Services Act) and the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department.