

Food Rewards Backfire: What Parents Should Do Instead

Using treats as a carrot can warp the way kids eat.

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Why Food Rewards Backfire

JUST THE OTHER DAY I opened my daughter's backpack to find a note from the Parent Teacher Association. It was a simple note about how students were going to be collecting box tops to raise money for the school. The classes that brought in the most would get a "treat" party. Immediately, I thought "uh-oh." There is absolutely nothing wrong with eating the foods that many call "treats, sweets or desserts." But when we give children a reward of food, without realizing it, we teach them food is something to be earned.

Food should never have to be earned. We need to eat to survive. Strings should never be attached to any type of food. That's because, experts say, using food in a transactional way can have unintended consequences.

Food Rewards Can Undermine Self-Regulation

"Using food as reward gives the food power that interferes with children's natural ability to be intuitive eaters," says Anna Lutz, a registered dietitian, and eating disorder and pediatric nutrition specialist in Raleigh, North Carolina. Earlier that same day, Lutz told me her daughter came home with four chocolates – a reward for staying quiet at naptime. "When we use food in this way, we teach kids that the food is so good and rare they have to do something hard to deserve it," she adds.

If a child has been raised to eat in response to hunger at meals and snack time, using food as a reward may be confusing. In her work as a nutrition therapist, Blair Mize, a registered dietitian and owner of Memphis Nutrition Group, counsels parents that food is meant to be rewarding when eaten in response to hunger.

Mize warns that using food to reward can potentially disrupt a child's ability to accurately recognize and respect hunger and fullness signals. She suggests avoiding using food as a reward because the short-term incentive can have long-term effects on the child's relationship with food.

Children Learn to Overvalue Certain Types of Food

In this case, the food reward for bringing in box tops not only teaches kids to do the project for external reasons (versus growth or learning), it singles out kids who didn't or couldn't participate. "Extrinsic motivation with food distracts (from) the learning process and distorts children's relationship with food," says Kelly Fullerton, an Australia-based primary school teacher and nutritionist at The Curious Nutritionist. Promoting intrinsic motivation instead enables students to work through problems and learn from mistakes, she says.

When we make food the ultimate prize, we teach kids that this is the best reward, eclipsing other things such as pride or success that comes from hard work and collaboration. This also elevates the emotional power of treats, says Sumner Brooks, a registered dietitian and founder of EDRDPro, an educational

platform for professionals specializing in the treatment of eating disorders. “Research shows that kids who experience food being used as a reward are more likely to use food to cope emotionally in response to negative emotions, rather than eating for hunger and satiety.”

It’s not that food can’t be part of the festivities when you’re having fun. But, “there’s a fine line between the role of certain foods in celebration, which is positive, and using those foods to reward behavior,” says U.K.-based registered nutritionist Sarah Dempster. She emphasizes that when food is a reward it not only diminishes intrinsic motivation for the behavior, it puts the food on a pedestal, meaning children desire those foods even more.

Some Kids Feel Excluded

When fellow mom Marsha Endre read the same PTA message she had another reaction. She was concerned that her son would be further isolated because of his food allergies. When classes have food-related rewards, it adds another layer of concern. Endre says that when there are larger functions or so-called treat parties, her son gets anxious about encountering food allergens and feels sad that he can’t participate.

When school lessons include food rewards it can cause more than confusion, it can be dangerous. Endre says these lessons cause her son to feel like an outsider – unable to fully participate with his peers. “If the food-related reward is eaten in his classroom, then there is another layer of concern because kids touch everything,” Endre says. “My child could still encounter the residue of his allergen days after an event.” As such, a simple lesson can turn into a week of fear and anxiety for a child with food allergies.

There’s Another Way

Food can be social. Food can connect us. It can be part of celebrations but not the celebration itself. Let food be food.

“I love celebrating with food, it brings us joy as humans,” Brooks says. “To share food together is a sacred and special way to connect.” However, celebrating a specific food puts the focus on that food, and takes it off social connection and paying attention to the body’s cues, she says, noting that all types of foods have a place at a party.

So the next time you encounter food rewards with a school lesson, in your own home, at church or otherwise, think about how we can keep food in its place as sustenance that doesn’t need to be earned. And then reward kids with something else like – per my young daughter’s preference – letting them run and play.