

Using Rewards and Punishments

Best Practices



Rewards

- ☑ **Don't set unrealistic goals.** If your child doesn't believe they can achieve their goal, they won't try. A general rule of thumb is that your child should earn their reward about 75% of the time.
- ☑ **Rewards must be desired.** A new pair of shoes isn't a good reward if your child doesn't care about shoes.
- ☑ **Rewards should be given regularly and consistently.** Instead of offering one big reward for a long-term accomplishment, try offering smaller rewards as your child completes steps toward the larger goal. For example, offer rewards for completing homework rather than a good report card. Children can't plan for the future in the same way adults do, and a report card that's three months away feels like it's one-hundred years away.
- ☑ **Always follow through.** If you promise a reward, and don't follow through, you've just made your life much more difficult. Next time you promise a reward, your child won't believe you. Why should they? That being said, this goes both ways. If your child doesn't earn the reward, they don't get it!
- ☑ **Be clear about the requirements to receive a reward.** It's likely that your idea of a clean room is different than your child's idea of a clean room. Be specific, like this: "If you pick your clothes up off of the floor and put them in the dresser, vacuum, and make your bed, we will go to a movie."
- ☑ **Be clear about the reward itself.** If you say: "I will buy you a new pair of shoes if you study for at least one hour every day this week", your child will be in for a sad realization when they try to pick up a \$200 pair of sneakers. Be clear about any limitations on the reward from the start.
- ☑ **Don't take away rewards that have already been earned.** If your child earns a trip to the movies, and then they get in trouble for something unrelated, don't take away the reward. You can still use punishment, but it should be separate. Taking away rewards can lead to a constant sense of defeat when a child works hard, yet never sees positive outcomes.
- ☑ **Try rewarding good habits instead of good outcomes.** For example, reward your child if they study for an hour each night, instead of rewarding them for an A on a test. Even though it seems obvious to adults, many children don't know how to get an A on a test. Use rewards to teach your child habits that will eventually lead to the ultimate goal.

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Punishments

☑ **Create a few simple and clearly defined rules and punishments.** Children will have a hard time understanding a long or complex list of rules, and there's no chance for success if they don't know what the rules are.

☑ **Always follow through.** The threat of punishment will quickly become meaningless if the punishments never actually happen. It's easy to feel sympathetic and let your kid off the hook, but this is when you need to put your foot down.

☑ **Don't overdo it.** Many parents have a habit of dishing out extreme punishments when they're upset. Grounding your child for a month is as much a punishment to you as it is to your child. After a few days, most parents have cooled down, and they're tired of having a bored kid around the house, so they end the punishment early. This tells your child that you don't really mean it when you threaten punishments.

☑ **Don't overdo it (part 2).** If you ground a child for a month, or take away everything they care about, your child will have little motivation to be good. To a child, a month seems like an eternity. Why should they do their homework if they're grounded "forever" anyway? You've just given up all of your leverage.

☑ **Take away privileges.** Removing TV or phone privileges can be very effective.

☑ **Never use corporal punishment (not even spanking).** Hitting your child might get you what you want now, but it will cause trouble later on. Children who receive corporal punishment learn that hitting and violence are appropriate response to their problems, and they tend to be more aggressive with other children, and they carry this into adulthood.

☑ **Never use emotionally painful punishments such as humiliation.** Shaming and humiliating children can irreparably damage your relationship and cause significant distress that results in long-term consequences.

☑ **Don't take away something that's good.** If your child calms down by playing guitar, don't take away their guitar when they're angry. If your child is motivated to get good grades so they can play on their school basketball team, don't take away basketball.

☑ **Talk to your child about why they are being punished, and help them learn.** Help your child develop a strategy to deal with the situation differently in the future. Punishments won't do much good if your child doesn't learn from the experience.

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Other Advice

- ☑ **Don't underestimate the power of a smile or a "good job".** Whether they admit it or not, most children want the approval of their parents. Sometimes these little rewards can be more powerful than anything else.

- ☑ **Choose your battles.** So, your child has picked the clothes up off the floor, and put them in the dresser, but the clothes aren't folded neatly. Let it go! Ask yourself: "Is this problem really that important right now?"

- ☑ **Try to catch your child being good.** Is your hyper child sitting still? Let them know that you notice! Make a goal of catching your child being good (no matter how minor it seems) at least three times a day. The best way to end a bad behavior is to reward the opposite good behavior.

- ☑ **Praise behaviors instead of traits.** For example, if your child gets a good grade, praise their hard work instead of their intelligence. If your child believes they passed a test because of their intelligence, what does it mean when they fail a test? Also, praising a behavior such as hard work will lead to more hard work, but traits like intelligence are outside of your child's control.

- ☑ **Be fair.** You want your child to do the dishes, and they want to play a video game. Instead of telling them to wash the dishes "right now", give them a reasonable time frame. Try this: "I need you to finish washing the dishes within the next hour". How would you feel if you were watching your favorite show, and your partner demanded you do the laundry "right now"?

- ☑ **Be specific about your praise.** If your child is working hard on homework, say, "I like how well you are focusing." If your child does the dishes on their own, say, "Thank you for helping with chores today."

- ☑ **In some cases, it's better to ignore bad behavior than to punish it.** Oftentimes bad attention is better than no attention, and children know that they are noticed when they are irritating. In other words, taking the time to talk with and punish your child can be interpreted as a reward in these situations. If your child's behavior isn't dangerous or destructive, and you think they're just trying to get your attention, ignore them until they stop.