

LADC Behavior Handout



Reward Systems

Is there a behavior that you would like to see more of in your child? Are you helping your child learn a new behavior that is difficult for them? Commonly, parents are recommended to utilize reward charts as a way to strengthen new behavior or behaviors that they want the child to display on a more frequent and independent basis. As a parent you may have your own beliefs in favor of or against reward systems. I encourage you to read on, even if you are against reward charts in your home, to learn about some of the misconceptions regarding reward systems and how to make your reward chart most effective!

First, it is important to begin addressing some concerns parents may have regarding the use of reward charts or reinforcing behavior and past parenting articles that advise against it. Just like any parenting tool, it can be used inappropriately or too much, which could cause it to be ineffective. Additionally, just like any parenting tool, every reward system must be individually tailored to the child and adapted overtime as the child grows and responds behaviorally to the reward chart.

Common Misconceptions About Reward Systems

Intrinsic Motivation

Parents sometimes worry that if they reward their child for doing a task, then the child will come to expect rewards all the time in the future or will lose their intrinsic motivation to do hard tasks. For parents with this concern, it is important to remember that you are using reward charts only for behaviors that your child is already not intrinsically motivated to learn or complete consistently. That being said, the reason that many children become intrinsically motivated is because they develop a behavior as a habit and then natural reinforcement from the environment maintains the habit. If the child can't do the behavior long enough and consistently enough for it to become a habit or for natural environment contingencies to reinforce the behavior (e.g. it feeling good to have friends want to play with you), then it will be much more challenging for that child to develop or consistently display that desired behavior.

Common Misconceptions About Reward Systems

Never-Ending Need for Rewards

Another common fear of parents regarding reward charts is that if you begin a reward chart, your child will have a never-ending need for rewards to keep the behaviors happening. This is definitely a misconception as often reward charts are either faded out over time (more information provided below) or you change the focus of the rewards to a new desired behavior.

Is it Bribing?

Another common fear of parents regarding reward systems is that there is concern that they are bribing or manipulating their children to do positive behaviors. However, what parents forget, is that the world is already full of so many rewards, we just don't bring attention to them or think about those behaviors as being rewarded. For example, you might work really hard on a project at work so you can leave early on a Friday (reward) or you attend work regularly so that you can get paid (reward). Maybe you allow yourself to have an ice cream treat tonight because you went to the gym consistently for the last 5 days (reward). Rewards are part of everyday life. Children even have rewards already built into their days and weeks; however, it is possible that you haven't viewed it as that. They already get to play on electronics, watch movies, have ice cream or go to the park. Those are rewarding activities for your child. For a reward chart to work, it isn't necessary to add in more rewards to your child's life, you can just restructure how your child gets access to activities and situations that are already very rewarding to them. Remember though, if the child gets the reinforcer before the behavior is displayed, that is a bribe! If the child has to display the behavior first, that is a reward!

How To Choose the Behaviors for Reward Systems

Pick a concrete behavior that is observable. You don't want to pick a behavior such as "no lying" as you can't always tell or prove that the child hasn't lied. It is also helpful to always phrase the target behavior in positive language. Describe what you want to see the child do, rather than rewarding the child for not doing something. For example, instead of rewarding your child for not throwing toys, find a system to reward your child when he is able to play gently with toys. As stated before, you also want to use reward charts for behaviors that are something that the child needs to be able to do and they currently aren't doing it because they don't like it or they don't yet have the skills to be able to consistently do it. Reward systems can help to provide that bridge between a behavior they can't/won't do and a habit by creating a reason for them to try it more than once.

Setting Up Reward Systems

When setting up the reward system, you want to make sure that you pick a frequency of rewarding the behavior that will allow your child to feel successful and build momentum. Initially, it will be important to have your child earn the first reward relatively quickly (3-5 days if it is a behavior, they have to do multiple times a day). This helps to build the excitement and desire to continue to earn more. Additionally, if you are defining positive behaviors that you want to see but rewarding each example would be too many stickers or too hard to define, you could reward for a certain time frame of them displaying the behavior. For example, if you want to reward your child for playing nicely with their sibling, you could break the day into 1-2 hour intervals and each time that hour passes and they played nicely the entire time for that hour, they then get a sticker.

Reward Systems Continued

Alternatives for Reward Systems

If your child isn't excited about stickers, you could have your child put stamps on a chart or pom-poms in a jar. You can use any object as the placeholder for points. When your child receives the designated amount of points/stickers, then they can earn the reward. It is most effective to reward the behavior immediately after the behavior occurs, such as giving the sticker right away or having them put a pom-pom in their jar immediately.

Additionally, to build excitement to earn points towards a reward, it is helpful to have the child pick out an option of a reward they are working towards and remind them about that reward/activity! Some children will find that they become unmotivated for the activity they originally chose; therefore, it can also be helpful to have a couple of options for them or to pick a surprise reward from the jar!

Fading Reward Systems

Once your child has consistently demonstrated the desired behavior, you can slowly fade out the reward system for that behavior by increasing the amount of points or stickers that your child must earn before getting the reward. Furthermore, you can also begin to provide stickers or points every other time the behavior occurs to also fade out the use of the stickers or the points. It is important to continually give verbal attention and praise towards the new behavior, even if they are no longer earning rewards for it. Finally, you can also switch the reward system to a new behavior or add in a behavior to the reward system as a way of fading or increasing the difficulty.

Example Reward Ideas

Potential Activity Rewards

- Pick a story
- Choose the dinner
- Pick flowers
- Horsey-back ride
- Work on a puzzle
- Style parent's hair
- Water play or water fight
- Build up, and then knock down blocks
- Play board games
- Help fix dinner
- Play a musical instrument
- Pop balloons or paper bags
- Draw or color pictures
- Water plants
- Paint with water
- Play with a squirt gun
- Take a picture with a camera
- Blow soap bubbles
- Go on a walk with parents
- Face painting
- Be turned in a swivel chair
- Do an arts and craft project
- String beads
- Look through binoculars
- Play with a voice recorder
- Be pulled in a wagon
- Have timed foot races
- Got to a museum, park, etc.
- Select a TV program
- Bedtime 15 minutes later
- Use a video camera
- Dance with a parent
- Blow up a balloon and then let it go!
- Choose a movie or video game to play
- Walk the dog
- Paint fingernails
- Make a sandcastle

Even if you have been hesitant in the past to try reward systems, give it a try with these tips and see the success!