



Say "No" to Food Rewards



Discover the Top 10 Reasons
Why Using Food as a Reward Hurts Your Child

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“No dessert until you eat your vegetables!” Probably every parent has said this at least once. And does it work? Absolutely!

Enticing ice cream, cookies or cake sure make those green beans or broccoli go down fast. But while you may be winning the battle – you’re losing the war. Using food as a reward leads to unhealthy eating behaviors and poor health outcomes that can last a lifetime. Recent research finds 35% of children and teens in the United States are overweight or obese, so it is vital for parents to create an environment that supports a healthy relationship with food.



Top 10 Reasons Why Using Food as a Reward Hurts Your Child

1. It harms the body

Reward foods are usually empty calorie items like cookies, candy, ice cream, fries or chips. These foods are high in salt, sugar, and fat that can cause weight gain, high blood pressure, and [cavities](#).

2. It creates poor eating habits

Using food as a reward teaches children to eat when they're not hungry and overrides their natural signals of hunger and fullness. Children also begin to associate reward foods with emotions – for example, “if you did a good job you deserve a cookie”—potentially leading to disordered eating later in life.

3. It can jeopardize future health

Overconsumption of empty calorie snack foods can increase the risk of [developing diseases such as cancer](#), diabetes and heart disease later in life.

4. It sends mixed messages

Being told that certain foods are unhealthy and then offering them as a reward is confusing. It undermines the messages you have been giving your kids for years about the importance of eating healthy foods.

5. It treats junk food like gold

More often than not, celebrations at home and school [involve cake, pizza, and other junk foods](#). When you offer these foods as a reward or on a special occasion, your child may begin to believe that these irresistible foods hold value.

6. It creates negative associations with certain foods

If you use the promise of treats to force children to eat foods they don't like (i.e., “no dessert until you eat your broccoli”) it can instill negative opinions of food that can last a lifetime.

7. It takes decision making out of your child's hands

As a parent it's your responsibility to offer your child healthy food options, and their responsibility to decide what and how much they want to eat. By pressuring them into eating food they don't want in exchange for food they can't resist you're taking away their power of choice.

8. It limits your child's palate

Children have more than double the number of taste buds than adults. Additionally, they have a higher preference for sweet-tasting foods and a harder time accepting bitter flavor profiles.

Continuously rewarding kids with foods they're inclined to like will discourage them from training their taste buds to enjoy different flavors.

9. It mistakenly labels your child a “picky eater”

It takes at least 10-15 exposures for children to eat a new food. If they don't want to eat something, they don't have to. Accept them playing with or putting food in their mouth then spitting it out as a step in the right direction. [Lead by example and try new foods too!](#)

10. It takes away your power as a parent

You'll become a slave to these foods. You might find yourself having to offer food rewards every time you ask your child to do something they don't want to do – for example, “If you clean your room I'll give you ice cream.”

Here are 10 of the Super Crew Kids' favorite strategies for creating a positive food environment without food rewards you can try with your family:

1

Offer non-food rewards! Get creative and instead give your child a thumbs-up, art supplies, choice of family activity, or extra playtime.



2

Make healthy foods more appealing! Use cookie cutters to cut food into fun shapes like hearts and stars.

3

Get kids involved! Get them to pick produce at the store or help prepare new dishes and snacks in the kitchen.

4

Give food fun names! Let your kids invent names for new foods or even name a dish after them. Some favorites include snow puffs for cauliflower or the green keen energy machine for smoothies with baby spinach.

5

Use your words! Ask the family to describe how food looks, tastes, and smells rather than whether they simply like or dislike something.

6

Get your kids involved in planting something, no matter how small, like an herb planter. Then, let them decide how to add them to a dish.



7

Serve dinner “family style” and let your child serve him or herself. By offering healthy foods, and not forcing them, your child gets to decide to try something or not, without any negativity.

8



Make one night a week “kids night,” where your children get to decide what everyone eats for dinner and help make the meal.

9

Keep fresh fruits and vegetables readily available at all times in the kitchen and limit junk foods. For example, cut up fresh fruits and veggies for easy snacks. The more your child is exposed to foods, the less scary the foods will seem!

10

Make eating healthy relevant to your child. Use the [Super Crew](#) to help you explain the plant power of foods.



Make That Change!

YOU can positively impact your child's food preferences and energy intake and help create a lifelong healthy relationship with food! Avoiding the use of food as a reward can also help prevent a lifetime of health issues.



Food Rewards!

Your turn...

Have you ever used food as a reward? Write down three examples of instances you used food as a reward either for your child or yourself.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Create three, non-food reward goals to try with your family. These goals should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely).

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Here are some examples of SMART Goals:



The next time my child does not want to eat her vegetables, I will tell her that if she tries them, I'll play her favorite game with her after we finish eating.

Starting tonight, I'll serve dinner family style so my children can pick and choose what and how much they want.

Once a week I'll let my son pick a new healthy food at the grocery store and prepare it with him for dinner.

Don't miss out on our fun recipes, activities and much more in our [Super Crew Healthy Kids Today Tool Kits](#) with the American Institute of Cancer Research.

Our guidance doesn't stop here- we're always looking for more ways to help! Check out some of our other resources to keep your momentum going:

- **Need ideas for healthy meals and snacks, or tips for picky eaters?**
Check out our [nutrition articles](#) for a treasure trove of great info and ideas.
- **Looking to improve the health of your family?**
Get the in-depth knowledge and skills you need with our convenient and flexible [online nutrition courses](#).
- **Trying to get dinner on the table?**
Print our [coloring pages](#) and [activities](#) to keep your kids entertained while learning about healthy eating from the Super Crew.
- **Want the latest tips and tricks?**
Stay up-to-date with the SuperKids by joining the conversation on [Pinterest](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and SuperKids Nutrition Founder's [Blog!](#)