

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Tips For Encouraging Good Behavior In Your Children

from the American Counseling Association

As parents we all would like to have perfect, well-behaved offspring of whom we can always be proud. Yes, well, it's nice to dream. Kids are kids, and while we love them, and while they may often try to please us, they are also going to continue to be kids and do things that encourage those gray hairs we're now noticing in the mirror.

For most parents, when our children are not living up to our expectations, the natural reaction is to punish or lecture in order to "teach" the child that what he or she did was wrong. While that will usually end the undesired behavior ("Put down the chainsaw, Jimmy!"), it's often a short-lived change, happening mostly to stop the lecture, yelling or punishment.

What researchers have found is that in order to alter long-term behavior, rewards are generally more effective than punishment or other negative consequences. Knowing how to use rewards to promote the right types of behavior should be an important part of parenting skills.

Note that rewarding good behavior is not the same as "bribing" your children. Your goal is to help your children learn that good consequences come from good behavior.

Sometimes a reward might be something tangible – a toy, a favorite food, a new book – that says thank you for the good behavior and encourages more of it for the future.

But rewards can also be intangible – time spent with Mom or Dad, extra play time, getting to watch a favorite TV show or spend time on the computer. Often kids find more value in such rewards than in that new toy. Studies find that simple praise for something done well is one of the most powerful and long-lasting rewards for children of all ages.

You also have to think about how you reward positive behavior. Rewards should be given occasionally and when they aren't expected, otherwise they do become bribes. They should also be given immediately after the desired behavior, not hours or days later. And it's important to reward effort, not just final performance. Trying to do the right thing counts.

Tangible rewards will lose their value over time, but when children know they'll earn your praise and approval for good behavior, it can be a real motivator. Just letting your children know that you appreciate when they're working to do the right thing is often reward enough.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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