

Charting Rewards

Dr. Matt Sanders

If you have young children, or know people who do, you've more than likely at some stage experienced a colored piece of cardboard with squares drawn on it and rows of little smiley faces or stars stuck on a fridge door.

Welcome to a very effective way of encouraging positive behavior in children from two-and-a-half years old up to nine and ten.

It might seem a little weird or over the top at first, but the use of a "happy faces chart" or "star chart" is based on the long held tenet that good behavior deserves encouragement.

For example, a mother I recently worked with helped her son, Sam, learn to go to bed without a fuss by the use of a star chart over a few weeks. At bedtime, Sam would be rewarded with praise from his mother and a red star on his chart each time he went to bed without protesting. Three stars in a row and he earned a reward of his favorite dessert with dinner the next night.

As in Sam's case, behavior charts are particularly useful for daily home routines such as set chores like drying dishes or keeping a bedroom tidy, as well as for homework. They take the heat out of possible stressful conflicts and reduce the possibility of a parent nagging their child to do something — a good thing to avoid since it encourages children to only cooperate when nagged.

To get the best use out of a chart, choose a reward that is earned in exchange for a set number of stars or smiley faces. Some of the best (and cheapest) rewards involve activities rather than things — staying up a bit later to watch a favorite television show, having a friend over for the night, or playing a board game with mom or dad after dinner.

Of course, the question that is sometimes asked about all these rewards is, "Aren't I just bribing my kids to do something they are supposed to do?"

The simple answer is that many children won't comply without rewards and that providing an incentive to try a bit harder at correcting a problem allows parents to offer support and recognition to their children in tangible ways.

Children who benefit most from the use of rewards and behavior charts are frequently not motivated to change and do not enjoy the tasks they need to perform. They may never have experienced the satisfaction of completing a task. Rewards help children to experience success.

So will your child become dependent on rewards?

Not if you follow a few simple rules.

First, always make sure you praise and pay your child attention at the same time that you give them the star or smiley face so that the reward can be phased out. After a child has mastered the skill make the rewards less predictable, more like occasional surprises. Second, use rewards that are activities rather than things you have to buy. Third, always give the reward when your child

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Healthy children—body, heart and mind.

has earned it, not when they asked for it. And fourth, use the chart sparingly for only about two to three weeks at a time for a specific new behavior.

Once a new behavior is learned, weaning your child off the specific rewards will allow you to keep the improved behavior going along with just a little bit of positive attention and recognition.

Dr. Matthew Sanders is a clinical psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia and founder of the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program.

For local resources on Positive Parenting support for common behavior issues such as tantrums, whining, disobedience, bedtime problems and more contact Raise & Shine at 707-462-1233 or visit www.raiseandshine.org for a schedule of free workshops, classes and private consultations in your area.

