

Incentive Program: Using Reward and Behavior Charts

When it comes to teaching children new skills and behaviors, there are a variety of methods to choose from. One approach is using a behavior or reward chart.

Occasionally, a child could benefit from a little extra encouragement to change a behavior (such as hitting), practice a new skills (like using the potty), or to complete a task (for example, homework). Ideally, your goal is to help your child see that the behavior itself is the reward. For example, when you keep your hands to yourself and use your words when you're frustrated, your friends want to play with you.

If you think that your child could benefit from this system, here are some guidelines to follow.

Getting Started

Reward charts work best with ages 2-12 years. Ideally, the charts are used for a couple weeks and then are phased out once you see a change in behavior or your child successfully completes their task. Visually being able to track their success with stickers or smiley faces can help your child feel proud of their positive behavior and acknowledged for trying hard.

Step 1: Identify the behavior you want improved or task you want your child to complete. Be specific. "Listen better" is not as specific as "Respond within a minute and do what I ask him to do."

Step 2: Decide how you would like to make your chart. There are many templates available online, but you can easily make your own using paper and pens. All you need to do is decide how many days you would like to see improved behavior and how you would like to track progress, such as stamps, stickers, stars, smiley faces, etc. Talk about your idea with your child, and get their input. Earning Batman stickers will work well for some, but marking a big red "X" on the chart for everyone to see will be motivating for others.

Step 3: Make your chart together if possible. You will get better buy-in from your child. If you need inspiration, go online. Places like Pinterest has lots of ideas.

Step 4: Agree together about what they need to do to earn a sticker or stamp on the chart, as well as explain how often they can earn a stamp: "Every time you go potty on the toilet, you can put a sticker on your chart."

Step 5: Set a goal for the number of stickers your child needs to earn to get their reward: "Once you get 5 stickers on your chart, you can earn (whatever you agreed upon)." Don't make the goal so hard that it become unattainable for your child. In the beginning, two days of success is a good place to start before making it more challenging.

Step 6: Choose a prize. Ideally, the reward is small and inexpensive, but meaningful to your child. Some of the best rewards involve a special activity with mom or dad, such as going to the playground or having a picnic together. Other small treats could include renting a new movie from the library, a small toy or new book. Ask for your child's input on their reward, but be sure that their request is reasonable.

Step 7: Load on the praise when your child earns a sticker or stamp, as well as offer lots of encouragement and support when they do not meet their goal or earn a sticker or stamp for the day. Be sure to praise any effort you see, even if they didn't earn a sticker that day, and tell them, "You can try again tomorrow."

Step 8: If you child is successfully meeting their goal with ease, slowly make it a bit more challenging to get the reward. For example, maybe they need to use the potty 10 times in order to receive a prize. The behavior itself is becoming the reward in itself. For older children, you could set a weekly or monthly reward of a special family event, such as bowling night or a sleepover.

Behavior and reward charts are intended to be a short-term strategy. As you gradually phase out the chart and make your rewards less predictable, still continue to offer praise for positive behavior. Talk about how their life is better now that they are being successful with their goal.