

Using Candy to Reward Children for Good Behavior

By Joanne Ikeda, MA, RD

Cooperative Extension Nutrition Education Specialist

Nutritional Sciences & Toxicology

University of California, Berkeley

Today I received a copy of a letter sent home to parents by the Principal of an elementary school in California. In the letter, the Principal stated that the teachers at his school try to maintain a positive environment by rewarding good behavior. He noted that a number of teachers use candy treats as rewards. According to him, "These treats cost the teachers very little and they get a great return on their investment." He said that parents who do not want their child to be rewarded with candy, should notify the teacher so that an alternative reward is offered to their children.

What is happening here? The Principal and the teachers in this school have not made the link between what they are doing in their school and what is happening in the larger world around them. The prevalence of childhood obesity has increased three-fold over the past 30 years. In the early 1970's, 5% of children were overweight, now 15% are overweight. In the early 1970's, type 2 diabetes was referred to as "adult onset diabetes." Now pediatricians across the country are reporting that children as young as six years of age are being diagnosed with this condition. "It is frightening," said one pediatrician who has been in practice for many years, "I've never seen anything like it!"

We may be raising the first generation of children born after WW II whose lifespan will actually decrease due to a lifestyle that puts them at very high risk of chronic disease. For example,

- ◆ Four out of every five children are not eating the minimum recommended number of servings of fruits and vegetables. Instead, they are consuming foods of low nutrient density such as candy, cookies, chips, doughnuts, and French fries.
- ◆ There has been a dramatic increase in soft drink intake in children over the past 20 years while the rate of milk intake has decreased. School-age children who drink soda on a regular basis have a calorie intake that is 200 calories greater than the calorie intake of children who do not drink soft drinks regularly. Eighty-one per cent of teenage girls are not getting enough calcium in their diet because they drink more soda than milk.
- ◆ Children spend an average of 4 hours a day watching TV, and another half hour playing computer games. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting TV/Computer games to 2 hours a day.
- ◆ Less than half of children are physically active for an hour every day, which is the minimum amount of physical activity recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

◆ 80% of youngsters enrolled in middle schools in California could not pass the California Fitnessgram.

What does this have to do with giving children candy as rewards for good behavior? More than one would think. Human beings are born with an innate preference for sweet taste. This preference can be fostered or suppressed. If it is fostered, children will be resistant to eating foods that don't taste sweet – like vegetables, plain milk, and unsweetened cereal. Giving children candy on a regular basis helps to foster a sweet tooth and decreases the chance that these children will be open to eating the wide variety of foods needed for growth and health.

Research on child feeding practices has shown that foods used as “rewards” become more desirable to children than if they had not been used as rewards. So, when candy is used as a reward, children come to like it more and want it more than they would otherwise. When this “reward” food is freely available, children are likely to overeat it.

What about the children whose parents don't want them given candy as a reward? What will happen to them as they watch other children receive candy while they are given something else? Candy will become the “forbidden fruit.” It will become even more desirable to these children because they can't have it. Again, research has shown that when parents/teachers restrict access to a food that is available, children desire that food even more than if it wasn't restricted or wasn't present. When it does become freely available, the child will eat more of it than s/he would have if it hadn't been restricted. Sadly, the parents who do want their children to eat healthy food and don't want their children given candy, are put in the awkward situation of having this food become even more desirable to their children! How fair is this to those parents who are taking the responsibility to see that their children have healthy lifestyles?

The most bizarre thing about giving children candy as a reward is that we are giving children something that has little nutritional value and contributes “empty calories” to their diet. It's like saying, “Here is something that is not very healthy for you as a reward for being good.” Does this make sense?

If I were a parent whose child attended this school, I would give the Principal the information contained in this essay. If he continued to allow teachers to use candy as a reward, I would notify the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education. No, this is not “overreacting” to the situation. We cannot risk the health of our children because of ignorance or obstinacy. What appears to be an inexpensive solution to problematic behavior by this Principal and his teachers, will cost us millions of dollars in the long term. It is time for them to accept responsibility for their behavior and realize that what they are doing is not benefiting the children in their school and has the potential to harm the health of these children.

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