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Nutrition for Health

Minute Paper - Alternatives to Food as a Reward

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Food, beverages and candy are often used in schools to reward good behavior and academic performance. But using food as a reward may be teaching our students poor dietary habits and increasing their intakes of energy dense, low nutrient foods.

Using foods and beverages as rewards is working against a healthy school food environment in several ways. Using food to reward students teaches them that food is a good way to make them feel good about themselves. In addition, if the foods used as rewards are the typical “junk foods”, students get mixed messages. They learn about choosing a healthy lifestyle in nutrition education and health classes but see that their school doesn’t really value healthful food choices. In the short term, the candy bar that was given as a reward for winning the spelling bee may be providing calories, fat and sugar that none of our students need.

School districts across the country have created new non-food ways to reward students for achievement:

- Deliver attendance sheets or papers to the school office
- Be the first for show-and-tell
- Sit in a special seat or by friends
- Help a teacher in a classroom with younger children
- Earn extra independent time for reading or working on puzzles
- Receive a “get out of homework free” pass for one night
- Choose a video for the class to watch
- Earn extra recess for the entire class
- Choose a paperback book to take home
- Pick an outdoor activity for the class

Schools should also avoid using food as a punishment. Withholding treat foods may make a child want them even more. Punishing with activity, like running extra laps or doing sit-ups, can make a child dislike activity. Keep food and activity out of your options as way to reward or punish students.

Ms. Hermann specializes in health communications for parents and children. Her articles have appeared in major health, women’s, and parenting magazines and websites. She has worked with the Dannon Institute for the last ten years.

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