



How to Do I Prevent Food from Becoming a Punishment or Reward?

Rewards, Punishments, and Food

In the past, caregivers often used food to praise certain behavior. For example, if a child sat down quickly and quietly, she would get a yummy dessert. If a child continued to play and not sit down for lunch when asked, his favorite fruit may have been taken away. Like any other privilege, food was used as either a reward or punishment.

Recent studies have shown, however, that when food is used this way, it loses its meaning as a necessary part of our lives. Meals can be seen as good or bad, instead of times for positive interactions with their families or other children and caregivers. Eating problems in young children can be the unfortunate result of using food as a reward or punishment. These problems can lead to poor eating habits or unhealthy attitudes about food that can last throughout a child's life. To instill positive eating habits and mealtimes, let's look at healthy ways to incorporate food into a child's daily routine.

Do's and Don'ts

- Do serve a balance of healthy, age-appropriate foods at each meal.
- Don't replace a favorite food with another because of behavior. If the beloved item is on the menu, serve it, regardless of the child's actions.
- Do encourage children to try new foods by serving as a positive role model. If you won't eat the food, there is a good chance the child won't either.
- Don't offer more of a particular food if the child behaves. Your role as the caregiver is to provide enough healthy choices at each meal to meet the child's nutritional needs.
- Do create a warm, conversational atmosphere at mealtimes. Even with very young children, talk to them about what they are eating and use descriptive words like colors, textures, smells, etc. Talk about the day's events and activities that are yet to come.
- Don't force children to eat. Children will eat when they are hungry.
- Do allow children to leave the table when they are finished eating. Keeping a child at the table until a certain amount of food is eaten sets up a power struggle between the child and caregiver. Encouraging children to stop eating when they are full allows them to exercise independence, and also helps prevent obesity.
- Don't serve sugary, over-processed desserts. Instead, choose healthy desserts that can be served as part of the meal, such as fresh fruit. If a dessert is offered, ensure that every child receives it.