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## Think Different: Using Candy to Reward Children is Not Such a Sweet Idea

*What will it be today? A candy kiss or a gum ball? A mini peanut butter cup or a licorice stick?* Adults who regularly work with children are often looking for ways to reward them for good behavior and far too often, candy is the reward of choice. *So what's so bad about handing out a mini-chocolate bar or a few jaw breakers when a child does something "right"?* A lot. Read on for more information about why you shouldn't use candy as a reward, and what you can use instead!

More children are overweight than ever before. Children today have a greater chance of facing a major health problem such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. Today, more than ever, it's important to encourage and model for children how to choose, eat and enjoy healthy foods. *Did you know that children's food preferences for sweets increase when sweets are presented as rewards or when they are given along with positive adult interaction?*<sup>1</sup> It's true, and that's what's wrong with giving out a piece of candy every time a child at home takes a nap or picks up his or her toys; or every time a student at school gets an A on a spelling test, finishes a chapter book or sits quietly when the teacher is talking.

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### FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

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Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program staff at MSU Extension can answer questions or help you learn more about money management, parent, food, nutrition and health issues. MSU Extension educators integrate university and community resources to provide tools that help families succeed. For more information on FCS programs in Michigan, call your county MSU Extension office. Check the government pages of your phone book for contact information.

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In addition to candy being bad for your teeth and not being very nutritious, children and adults should learn to eat all foods — including candy in response to being hungry, not in response to food given out as a reward. When parents and educators give food to children as a reward they are teaching them to eat in response to a situation, not in response to being physically hungry, which can lead to overeating, eating when they are not hungry, or eating to reward themselves. *What can you give students and children instead of candy for a reward?*

Following are a few suggestions:

### At Home

1. **Take a Book Break.** Curl up with your child in a comfortable chair and read him a new book or one that is an old favorite.
2. **Treasure Chest.** Set up a treasure chest filled with non-food goodies kids love such as colorful pencils, stickers, tattoos, mini-rubber balls, etc. Allow your child to pick a treasure from the chest once a week, or however often you wish.
3. **Cook's Helper.** Allow your child, whatever the age, to help prepare dinner (no matter how messy it gets!). Learning to cook and prepare food is a great way to spend quality time, away from the TV with your child.
4. **Outdoor Game Time.** Let your child choose a favorite outdoor game to play with you. Spend 30 minutes outside, playing the game. Your child and your body will love you for it!

### At School

1. **Star Performance.** Allow students to earn good behavior points toward the teacher performing a special skill e.g., standing on your head, singing and playing the guitar, etc.
2. **Teacher Time.** Students earn points toward a special lunch or walk with the teachers.
3. **Talk Time.** If all students follow the class rules for a specified time, they earn a designated number of talk time minutes to be redeemed on Friday of each week. Students can also work toward earning *game* time, *free choice* time or an *extra recess*.
4. **Music in the classroom.** Students can earn time to listen to music while working on something silently during class time.

If you're looking for more ideas on what to give children instead of candy as a reward, Michigan Team Nutrition has a fact sheet called *Alternatives to Using Food As A Reward*, that lists at least 50 low-cost or zero-cost ideas you may want to implement at home or if you're a

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teacher or educator, in your classroom. To download this fact sheet go to [www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu](http://www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu) and click on *Hot Topics*. For more information on this topic and other food, nutrition, health or money management issues contact the MSU Extension. MSU Extension Family and Consumer Science educators are located in all 83 Michigan counties to integrate university and community resources to help families succeed.

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#### **References:**

1. Birch LL, Zimmerman SI, Hind H. The influence of social-affective context on the formation of children's food preferences. *Child Dev.* 1980;51:856-861.

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