

# Using praise and rewards to encourage good behaviour

A guide for parents



West Lothian Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health Services  
(CAMHS)

## **The importance of praising your child**

We all have to learn how to behave. Both good and bad behaviour is encouraged if an adult gives a child attention. Adults can teach children how to behave well by paying attention to good behaviour.

When you are coping with lots of difficult behaviour, it is easy to forget all the good things your child does. This leaflet is designed to give you suggestions about how you can use praise to encourage good behaviour in your children.

## **How to make praise work**

### **General points:**

- Be generous with your praise, use it as often as you can
- Make a big effort to give praise for every bit of good behaviour, no matter how small
- Do not expect your child to be perfect. Praise all efforts to be good.

### **How to use praise effectively:**

- Praise your child straight away, immediately after the good behaviour
- Make sure you have eye contact with your child
- Be enthusiastic and genuine
- When you praise, tell your child exactly what you are praising him/her for
- Use words like “brilliant”, “wonderful”, “great”, and tell your child you are proud and pleased.

### **Concentrate only on praise:**

- Only talk about the good behaviour you have just seen. Do not confuse by being critical at the same time

- Do not stop praising, even if the child misbehaves after he is praised
- Some children take a long time to get used to being praised before they believe they can actually change their own behaviour.

### **Ways to make your praise work even better:**

- Praise your child in front of other people who will hopefully add their praise to yours
- Hugs and kisses, as well as verbal praise, will help your child learn more quickly.

### **Some examples of praise:**

- “I am really pleased when”.....you share with your brother
- “Clever boy for”.....picking up your toys
- “Well done! I’ve got to tell your dad that you”.....helped to set the table.
- “I feel so proud of you for”.....getting ready for bed when I told you.
- “Thank you for” .....helping your sister with the puzzle.
- “Look how well you can”.....
- “Good girl for”.....
- “What a fantastic job you’ve done of”.....

### **What to avoid**

- Do not expect your child to be perfect. We all make mistakes
- Do not pay attention to misbehaviour, try to ignore it

- Do not ignore children who are behaving well, e.g. playing quietly
- Do not give unnecessary or too many commands
- Do not nit-pick or constantly nag children about their behaviour
- Do not give praise and criticism together, e.g. do not say “Well done, but why can’t you do it all the time” or: “You were good today, but you were awful yesterday.”

## Using rewards to back up your praise

Using rewards to back up praise makes teaching your child how to behave much easier. **Always remember that praise and physical affection (e.g. cuddles and kisses) should be the first responses you give you’re your child behaves well.**

Using praise and rewards helps your child feel happier about him/herself and also makes them more confident. Praise and rewards also help your child feel more valued and appreciated by you. If your child has been misbehaving for a long time, they may not believe it is possible to behave in a different way. Praise and rewards will help to change this belief.

## How to use rewards

### How to choose rewards:

- Always ask your child what rewards they would like
- Choose one important behaviour to change at a time (e.g. going to bed on time)
- Offer rewards when your child has performed this behaviour
- When you offer a reward, you must be 100% certain you can keep your promise

- Try to avoid using money, expensive toys or big trips out, as you won't be able to provide these regularly
- Big treats can be saved for "surprise" rewards after a few weeks of good behaviour.

### **How to give rewards:**

- Rewards should be given often to be most useful
- As a general rule, young children (up to the age of four years need to be rewarded immediately. Children between 4-8 years should have a reward every 1-2 days. Older children should not wait for more than one week before being offered a reward
- Once you have promised a reward, do not take it away. You should always follow-through with treats your child has earned.

### **Examples of rewards**

Playing with a ball for 10 minutes

Renting a video

Having an extra story at bedtime

Going to McDonalds

Having a special bubble bath

Going to the park

Going swimming

Doing painting

Playing with water in the garden

Combing mum's hair

Getting a magazine

Having a picnic in the park

Having a picnic in the living room

Dressing up

Inviting a friend to play

Playing board games

Visiting a favourite cousin

Baking crispy cakes

### **Mistakes to avoid**

- Never promise a treat you may not be able to give

- Do not take away a reward once a child has earned it, even if they have misbehaved later
- Do not expect your child to get it right every time. Nobody is perfect!
- Criticism takes away all the effects of praise and the reward, e.g. do not say: “Well done, **but why can’t you do it all the time?**” or: “You were good today, but you were awful yesterday.”

## **Hints on how to use star charts and reward systems**

Reward systems are very useful ways to help children learn good behaviour. Younger children need something simple, such as a star chart, while older children can understand more complex point systems. Star charts in particular have been used widely with a variety of success.

It takes time for behaviour to change. Just because your child hasn’t totally responded in a week or so, does not mean you should give up. Hang in there, it does take time! Stars and points on their own do not work for very long. You need to keep the child’s motivation going, by being enthusiastic, encouraging and offering regular treats.

If you are worried, or would like more advice, speak to your Health Visitor to see if he/she can suggest any changes. The following information gives some ideas on how to make reward systems work successfully for your child.

### **Examples of reward systems:**

- Stars
- Favourite cartoon, football and music stickers
- Points
- Smiley faces
- Sweets in a jar
- Coloured ball or marbles in a jar.

### **Examples of behaviours that work well with reward systems:**

- Going to bed on time
- Tidying their room
- Going to the toilet
- Having a dry night
- Doing what you have asked, the first time you ask.

## **The way to success**

### **Setting up the system:**

- Only use the chart for one behaviour at a time. The more behaviours you include, the less useful the chart will be. Once you succeed in improving one behaviour, you can go on to another and so on
- Make sure your child knows, and can tell you and other people, what behaviour they are trying to improve
- Your child must be able to regularly achieve this behaviour. If they can't earn stars or points, they will quickly give up
- Ask the child to suggest rewards and you can agree them together. It is vital that the rewards are interesting to your child. Many reward systems simply don't work because the rewards are not exciting.

### **Using the system well:**

- The stars or points should be "cashed" in for small rewards and treats. These treats should be agreed before you start the system. As a general rule, most systems should enable a child to earn a small reward every day. Once the behaviour becomes more frequent, you can make it slightly harder to earn a star or point
- Once your child has earned a reward, you must make sure he/she receives it

- Vary the rewards, so the child doesn't get bored
- Show the chart to other people who are important in your child's life, e.g. showing it to grandparents and even a favourite teacher, will increase the praise your child receives which helps to maintain motivation and build self-esteem.

## Things to avoid

- Do not include more than one behaviour at a time in the reward system
- Once a child has earned a reward, do not withdraw it even if they have misbehaved. You must use some other way of dealing with the misbehaviour
- Do not use more than one type of chart at a time or put two systems on the same chart
- **Only use positive points**, e.g. if you use smiley faces for eating a meal, don't put an unhappy face if the child doesn't eat and don't add points for one behaviour and take away points for another.

## And finally remember...

Praise is one of the most powerful tools parents can use to encourage good behaviour in their children. Lots of praise will help make your children build confidence. It costs nothing to praise a child and the great thing is that it makes us feel good as well.

Praise, reward and reward charts are proven by research to be among the most successful ways to encourage children to behave well. Reward systems are very effective if used the right way, as outlined above. Keep it clear and simple and you have the best chance that the reward system will help your child behave well.

Children who have been misbehaving for a long time will need plenty of time and encouragement to believe they can change. **All** children respond better to praise and reward than they do to criticism and punishment.

If you use a mixture of all the above suggestions, you will find your child will quickly begin to enjoy behaving well for you. We believe that the suggestions in this leaflet should be the **first** things you use if you are worried about your child's behaviour.



Artwork by Nursing & Quality Department (January 2004)  
Updated 2014  
Copyright West Lothian CAMHS 2014