

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Trouble-Shooting Reward Programs: A Teacher's Guide

Introduction

Many teachers use reward programs to help reinforce positive student behaviors. However, sometimes these programs are ineffective or are effective for a while and then lose its impact. What can teachers do to make their reward systems work? How do they find rewards that the students actually finds reinforcing? What can they do when students argues with them every time they use a reward program These questions and others on reward programs will be addressed in this issue of *NASET's Practical Teacher*.

Q: *My reward program worked for a while but now it doesn't seem to be very effective. What can I do?*

A: There are several possible reasons why a reward program might begin to lose its effectiveness. You may want to experiment with changing aspects of the program until you find what is effective:

- **The student has lost interest in the current rewards.** Some students need to be given new reward choices more frequently than do typical children. Every so often, make a point to readminister the 'reward deck' or a reward inventory to the student to update his or her list of preferred rewards.
- **You have become inconsistent in administering the reward program.** Classrooms are busy places-so it is natural for the person who runs a reward program occasionally to forget to assign a point or give a reward. If the program is administered too inconsistently, though, it can stop working. Remember: a reward program is like a contract: its power depends entirely on how reliably it is enforced.

Reflect on your actions and decide whether you may have inadvertently begun to 'drift' from the program. Common problems that crop up include the adult being inconsistent in assigning points for positive behaviors or deducting points for negative behaviors, failing to record assigned points on a chart or graph, neglecting to give the student a chance to redeem points for rewards, and not having agreed-upon rewards available for the student.

Q: *I can't seem to find rewards that the student actually finds reinforcing. What should I use?*

A: Students vary a great deal in what kinds of activities, events, or opportunities they might find rewarding. No single reward choice appeals to every student. Here are some ideas to help you to figure out rewards that are likely to appeal even to picky students:

- **Ask the student to write down or tell you some activities that he or she likes to do.** Use this list as a starting point to generate ideas for possible rewards.
- **Observe the activities the student picks out during free or unstructured time.** Those activities that people typically do in their free time are those that they probably find appealing. If the student spends most of his or her free time 'hanging out' with other kids, for instance, you can probably think up socially oriented rewards for that student.
- **Ask the student's previous teachers, parent, or other significant adult what activities or rewards the student likes.** Other people who have known the student for a significant length of time may have useful insights into what rewards the student will find motivating.

Q: *My student argues with me every time I use the reward program. What should I do?*

A: Sometimes students will verbally challenge you—insisting, for example, that you should award a point that you believe they did not earn. Here are a couple of suggestions to reduce or eliminate such arguing:

- **Build a negative consequence for "arguing" into the reward program.** Explain to the student that you will impose a consequence whenever the student argues or verbally challenges your decisions about the reward program. You might choose, for example, to deduct a point from the student's total whenever he or she argues or suspend the reward program for 15 minutes (so that the student cannot earn points) whenever the student argues with you.
- **Avoid becoming an active participant in the argument.** It takes two to argue. As the adult, you can control student interactions by refusing to get pulled into arguments. If possible, keep your responses brief and your emotional state neutral.
- **Examine the quality of your own interactions with the student.** Students are most likely to argue with adults when they feel that they have been treated unfairly or ignored. Analyze your interactions with the student to be sure that you are not expressing anger or annoyance and that you do not use sarcasm. Consider offering the student positive opportunities to share his or her feelings or opinions with you (e.g., writing a letter, participating in a class meeting). Be sure that you are enforcing the terms of the reward program fairly—in particular, giving the student appropriate credit for good behaviors.

Q: *Other school staff or parents sometimes disagree with the rewards that I choose. What should I do?*

A: A complicating factor in setting up reward programs is that other adults may disapprove of those rewards that you have selected. For instance, a principal may be unhappy with a teacher who rewards a student with gum for good behavior, because the school has a "no gum chewing" policy. Try these ideas:

- **Preview potentially controversial rewards with fellow staff, school administrators, and/or the student's parents.** When in doubt, check with the school principal, other teaching staff and the student's parent about the acceptability of a specific reward idea.

- **Try to use pro-social and pro-educational reward choices whenever possible.** No one objects to student rewards that build social or academic skills. If a student were motivated to play an educational math game on the computer as a reward, for example, this academic reward would usually be preferable to offering the student a food treat. In short, if you know that non-controversial rewards work for a student, use them.
- **Document past reward efforts.** While most students can be motivated using traditional, education-friendly rewards, you will occasionally come across students who will strive only for rewards that others might regard as less acceptable (e.g., candy, coupons to skip homework). Sometimes these 'intervention-resistant' students have special needs and simply do not respond to those more typical rewards that normally shape kids' behavior. If you wish to make the case to other adults about the need to use controversial rewards with 'intervention-resistant' children, it may help to document that your previous attempts to use more typical rewards had been unsuccessful.
- **Educate staff about special-needs students.** You may also need to educate school staff about how a child's special needs may cause him or her to react to rewards in a manner different from more typical students. A teacher may observe, for example, that a child with substantial cognitive deficits is motivated only by a chance to earn snacks-even though his more typical age-peers regularly select social activities as rewards. The target student's intellectual deficits and relative emotional immaturity can help to explain why he is drawn to rewards more typical of a younger child.

Q: *I am going broke trying to buy rewards for students! What can I do?*

A: It can be costly to provide motivating rewards for individual students, let alone a whole classroom! Some suggestions:

- **Use a raffle-ticket reward system.** One cost-saving idea for group rewards that can make your prizes go farther is to design an attractive paper raffle ticket, which has a space for the student's name. Whenever the student earns a point for good behavior, have the student write his or her name on the ticket and toss it into a fishbowl or other container. Hold regular drawings, awarding prizes to those students whose tickets are selected.
- **Give 'Activity Coupons'.** Many of the most effective student rewards are activities that are readily obtainable in a school setting. Make a list of all of the rewarding opportunities that you or your fellow teachers and administrators can make available as prizes. For instance, one school may identify "Reading to kindergarten students during their Story Time" or "Delivering morning announcements" as potentially motivating activities. For each activity, create an 'Activity Coupon' that describes the activity and the number of points required to earn it. Students can redeem good-behavior points that they have collected for any Activity Coupon that they can afford.
- **Build a reward program around a 'prize box'.** Like most of us, students find novelty itself to be a motivating experience. You can use a prize box to build some excitement into a reward program, without having to purchase big-ticket items. First, decorate a large sturdy box. Fill the box with inexpensive prizes that students might find motivating (e.g., small toys, stickers). (You can even supplement the contents of the prize box with fun promotional items such as key chains or pencils.) When students earn a pre-determined number of points, they can draw the prize of choice from the box.

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