



Parenting During A Pandemic

Day 1: Motivating Children with Rewards

Welcome to our Brain Brolly blog on parenting during pandemic. We are starting this today as it is the first Monday that schools across the UK are closed for the foreseeable future due to the coronavirus outbreak. We plan to post day with advice and top tips on parenting during the pandemic and we hope this will be helpful. Please get in touch with topics you want to see covered and we will post based on what we are asked about most often during this time.

So, rewards. As Psychologists, this feels like skipping to the end. We would usually talk about lots of other things before getting to rewards. We have noticed, however, that lots of people are talking about setting up alternatives to education at this time and using rewards as part of this. Some people are worried about being stuck at home with children who may not really understand why this is all happening so they are setting up rewards to get through this time. Also, in our clinics, we often see examples of people trying their best with reward systems but finding that they are not working. So, we thought we'd give advice on this on day one in the hope that people can set up systems that should be helpful from the beginning.

Rewards should be something that we want. Essentially, that's what makes them motivating. But the first thing to think about is what the rewards are for. Yes, we've just said they are for motivating but motivating to do what? Sometimes we find that people try to make things too complicated in that rewards are for lots of things. What tends to happen here is that children then can't follow the system because they don't really know what they have to do to get the reward and often if rewards are for too many things, the adults can't follow the system either because we forget what we've offered rewards for!

Tip 1: Choose what to reward for.

- Decide on the behaviours you want to work on most and reward for them

Next, it's important to think what the actual goal is. This is about the detail. Does the child have to show you the behaviour all day long or once/twice/more times per day? It's

important here to remember that the goal is to motivate the child or young person to do things so if the goal is too big and they are unlikely to achieve it, the system won't work. If you make the goal smaller, you can build to something bigger later when you have a system already established for rewarding behaviour you want to see more.

Tip2: Set goals and keep it simple.

- Children and young people need to be clear about what they have to do to achieve the reward as well as where, when and how they will be expected to do it

So you've decided what you want the child/children to do for their reward and defined it as a goal you think they can achieve. Now you need to know how you will all know if they have achieved it. With increasing age and developmental stage, children become more able to wait for rewards. This means you can set up systems where they have to do something several times before a reward is given but each time has to count so you have to record it somehow so everybody is clear about what has been achieved and what still needs to happen before a reward is given.

You can create a chart, sometimes called a star chart or sticker chart to track progress. You could make the chart together as a way of discussing the new system. We have an example chart [here](#). You don't have to use a chart but it is helpful to think about how you will know if the child or young person has achieved the goal and how they will know.

Tip3: Keep track

- Set up a system to know if the goal has been achieved

The next part is really important and it's something we see happening lots which totally undermines the system and makes it fail. When a tick or sticker or mark is given on the chart as a sign of a positive step towards a goal, **DO NOT TAKE THEM AWAY** if things go wrong later even if it's right after the mark is given. If things go wrong later, the next tick/sticker/mark is not given but once it has been achieved it cannot be taken back. The reason for this is simple, the marks on the chart represent positives and steps towards a desired outcome, the reward. Everything about it is positive and motivating at this point. If we start to take things away, this introduces negatives. Children and young people won't like their marks or rewards being taken away so they associate this with a negative feeling. These negatives just cancel out the positives and the system is no longer motivating.

Tip 4: Keep the system motivating

- Don't take away indications of achievements towards a goal and a reward, that's not motivating.
- Instead motivate with the promise of the next achievement counting towards a desired reward.

Another issue with reward systems can be the language we use around them. Often we find ourselves saying things like ‘if you don’t do this, you won’t get the reward’ or ‘if you don’t stop doing this, you won’t get the reward’. If we think about what it would be like for us to be told these things, we can quickly see that it’s just annoying. It’s usually more helpful to use a positive spin ‘remember, if you do this, you can have the reward’. The tips up to now have been about setting up a motivating system so this one is about talking about it in a motivating way.

Also, just a quick note about praise. If a child or young person achieves a goal or a step towards a goal, this is a real positive and often we are good at praising this. Sometimes, however, we then neutralise this with a statement on the end like ‘if only you could do that every time’ or ‘let’s see if you can do that every time’. The advice here is to just let a positive be a positive. It will make the child or young person feel good and therefore more motivated to do it again.

Tip 5: Keep the language motivating

- Try to speak about the system in a positive way to keep it motivating
- Try to keep praise positive

What should a reward be? The advice here is really just that it should be something children or young people want but not something that causes other difficulties. It’s not really a good idea to give presents as rewards. These should be for special occasions. Also, there may well be an expectation of bigger and better presents over time. Food, particularly sweets and chocolate, also aren’t great because if they have lots of achievements this means lots of sweets potentially causing them to feel ill; not very motivating, and potentially having longer term effects on health. Generally, the best reward for children and young people is time. Time to do something they like, time with you is often the best. If you offer time to watch TV or play computer games as a reward, just ensure you limit this as part of the deal and consider what happens at the end of the time. This can become a battle you don’t want to set up for yourself. Future blogs will cover limit setting.

Tip 6: What will the reward be?

- You know it’s the first thing your child or young person will want to know so be prepared or risk them negotiating more than you really wanted to offer!

We touched on this earlier in talking about setting up a chart to monitor progress but the final point is about timing of rewards. We mentioned that as children get older they are more able to wait for rewards. This means you can set up a system whereby they have to achieve a certain amount of ticks or stickers or marks on the chart before getting the reward. You can offer a reward every day or every other day or every week. It’s really up to you. You know your child better than anyone else and you will know best about their

patience to wait for a reward. The marks on the chart can be rewarding in themselves and if you create the chart together with lots of positive chat about how great you think they will be at it then they may accept waiting a bit longer for the reward.

It's probably a good idea to set the system up so that it's fairly easy to achieve the reward initially and then you can make it a bit more difficult. If it's too hard in the beginning, you'll lose the motivating effect. Also remember that younger children can't wait long for a reward. This is to do with their attention and memory systems as well as how they learn about cause and effect.

Tip 7: Timing of rewards

- Think about when to give rewards and how many steps there will be to get there.
- Set the system up to be achievable to keep the motivating effect.

We hope these tips are helpful. Well done on managing the first day off school and we hope you will join us again tomorrow.

Tomorrow's topic: Setting up for success: How to set up the new routines around staying at home with children

Please [contact us with questions, comments or topics](#) you'd like to see covered. We'd love to hear your feedback.

Wishing you a safe and healthy path through this pandemic.