

Q & A: Creative ways to motivate kids
Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

Question: I have 11-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. When they misbehave I don't always have a ready consequence to give them. At times I reprimand, other times I threaten, and sometimes I take away privileges. They lose television and video game time which bothers my son and my daughter doesn't like to lose her computer time during which she instant messages her friends. They're really too old for spankings and it's difficult to get them to bed on school nights earlier than 8:30 PM. I've tried rewards and they like to earn an allowance, but they tend to spend it right away. It seemed easier to have rewards and punishments when they were younger, but I'm beginning to run out of ideas. Any suggestions?

Answer: Little kids, little consequences, bigger kids, bigger consequences. That seems to be the key when using negative and positive consequences to motivate children. And, as children grow into their tweens you need to be even more creative, especially if you have more than one youngster to discipline and motivate. Let's take a look at some imaginative rewards at your disposal to help motivate kids to behave and to act responsibly.

Creative Rewards:

Kids love earning money and I have some basic suggestions that may be of help. First, try having them earn a *daily* allowance based upon attitude (politeness, compliance, cooperation) and behavior (chore and homework completion in an accurate, cooperative and timely manner). I like to utilize colored poker chips in lieu of actual money as reward for having a "good day" (not too many attitude check marks and enough credits for completing chores). For instance, your son can receive a blue chip and your daughter a red one equaling a dollar each. This way, no one is motivated to "borrow" each others chips since they are color-coded. And, I would let them spend them as they liked, but only allowed to cash them in once a week so they must save, at least, until the weekend. The only way that an allowance works is to be careful not to arbitrarily buy them items without taking their chips in exchange. They need to consider whether the magazine or movie DVD is really worth it. If you hold out and have them make their own purchases they will eventually learn the value to a dollar. And, giving a check mark for rudeness or loss of credit due to not completing a responsibility is an easy answer for almost any discipline dilemma. You don't have to negotiate, ponder or be creative in the moment—just give the "bad check" or the good credit as the day progresses, and keep track on a calendar.

Kids love to be entertained and hate to be bored, and that's why electronics usage is so valuable. And, these are privileges, not "givens". Watching television, playing computer or video games, watching movies or listening to the radio or CDs all fall within the realm of privileges. And, don't forget about "communication"--use of the telephone, cell phone, instant messaging friends or web surfing (within parental guidelines) are fun activities to be earned, not just given as part of the child's day.

Also take a look at some of the activities that you engage in as a family. Perhaps some can be earned and used as rewards. Renting videos, picking the restaurant to go to for dinner, taking in an amusement park, bowling, miniature golf, attending a concert or even baking creative concoctions are all fun and can motivate kids to take their responsibilities seriously. Your two children can earn white poker chips to save up for these larger (not daily) privileges. You may choose to let only the one who earns the privilege engage in the activity, or you may wait until both have earned enough white chips.

Think outside of the box—how about Wednesday Waffle night in exchange for some white privilege chips? Or, extra time up on weekends (or 15 minutes on school nights) may be enticing. Would “exclusive parent time” in which the youngster determines how the hour will be spent with you—bike riding, roller blading, going paint balling or playing board games be neat? Sleepovers are big favorites, and should be earned not just allowed because the weekend has arrived. Ask the kids—they are the experts on what they’d like to earn.

You’ll never be at a loss for a consequence if you have attitude demerits and chore completion credits at your fingertips. The creative part occurs when determining the value of the poker chips—but that can be devised in a leisurely manner with the kids when you don’t have time constraints or drama on your hands!