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Using Candy as a Reward Leaves a Very Bad Taste

By Joanne Ikeda

I recently received a copy of a letter sent home to parents by the principal of an elementary school. In it the principal states that the teachers at his school try to maintain a positive environment by rewarding good behavior, sometimes with candy. According to him, "These treats cost the teachers very little and they get a great return on their investment." But, he says, parents who do not want their child to be rewarded with candy should notify the teacher so that an alternative reward can be offered.

What is happening here? The principal and the teachers have not made the link between what they are doing in their school and what is happening in the larger world. In the early 1970s, 5% of children were overweight; now 15% are overweight. In the early 1970s, Type 2 diabetes was referred to as "adult onset diabetes." Now pediatricians are reporting that children as young as 6 suffer from this condition. We may be raising the first generation born after World War II whose lifespan may decrease because of a lifestyle that puts its members at high risk of chronic disease. For example:

- Four out of five children are not eating the minimum recommended number of servings of fruits and vegetables. Instead, they are consuming foods of low nutrient density such as candy, cookies, chips and French fries.
- There has been a dramatic increase in soft drink intake in children over the last 20 years, while milk intake has decreased. Eighty-one percent of teenage girls are not getting enough calcium in their diet because they drink more soda than milk.
- Children spend an average of four hours a day watching TV and another half an hour playing computer games.
- Fewer than half of children are physically active for an hour every day; 80% of youngsters enrolled in middle schools could not pass the California fitness program.

What does this have to do with giving children candy as rewards for good behavior? More than one would think. We are born with an innate preference for sweet taste. This preference can be fostered or suppressed. If it is fostered, children will be resistant to eating foods that don't taste sweet, like vegetables, plain milk and unsweetened cereal.

Research on child eating habits has shown that foods used as "rewards" become more desirable to children than if they had not been used as rewards. So, when candy is used as a reward, children come to like it more and want it more than they would otherwise.

What about the children whose parents don't want them given candy as a reward? What will happen to them as they watch other children receive candy while they are given something else? Candy will become the "forbidden fruit." It will become even more desirable to these children because they can't have it. Studies also have shown that when restricted food does become freely available, the child will eat more of it than she would have if it hadn't been restricted.

How fair is all this to those parents who are taking the responsibility to see that their children have

healthy lifestyles?

Giving children candy as a reward is like saying, "Here is something that is not very healthy for you as a reward for being good." Does this make sense? If I were a parent whose child attended this school, I would give the principal all this information. If he continued to allow teachers to use candy as a reward, I would notify the superintendent of schools and the board of education. This is not overreacting.

We cannot risk the health of our children because of ignorance or obstinacy. What appears to be an inexpensive solution by this principal and his teachers to problematic behavior will cost us millions of dollars in the long term.