By Carolyn Webster-Stratton

Young children work very hard to become toilet trained, get dressed independently, play cooperatively, get ready for school on time, and learn to read. Good parents support their children with encouragement and praise, but occasionally kids need a little extra incentive to learn a particularly difficult behavior. That's where rewards can be helpful.

Parents sometimes worry that rewards will make their children "sticker dependent," or that using rewards will decrease intrinsic motivation. It's true that both of these outcomes are possible when reward systems are not well planned, or not developmentally appropriate. However, when used correctly, rewards can be a powerful tool to help children achieve a goal in a way that will lead to pride in their own accomplishments and an increase in their motivation.

In my book, *The Incredible Years*, I outline the steps parents should follow when setting up a reward system, and the most common pitfalls:

- Define developmentally appropriate child behavior clearly, using simple, positive language.
- Don't make programs too complex: choose one or two behaviours to start.
- Make the program fun.
- Choose incentives that are motivating and inexpensive. An extra bedtime story or 10 minutes of playtime can work as well or better than a toy or prize.
- Pair rewards with social praise, attention, and coaching statements.
- Make sure you consistently catch and immediately reward the behaviour.
- Revise or phase out the program as the behaviours become easier for your child.
- For young children (4-6 years) spontaneous, surprise rewards are the best way to celebrate their success at learning something new.
- Older children (6-10 years) are motivated by points or stickers that they can trade in for rewards from a menu they have helped to develop.
- Bribing children with the promise of a reward while they are misbehaving is ineffective and counterproductive.

Let's consider two different ways parents might use rewards. In the first scenario, six-year-old Marcus is struggling with reading. When Marcus's parents ask him to read instead of watching TV, he gets frustrated, distracted, and quickly gives up. So his mother sets up a system whereby he receives a special dinosaur sticker every time he reads a page with her. Marcus can earn 10 minutes of playtime with her (or a small treat, or TV time) every time he has collected five stickers. She also uses a kitchen timer to let him know that after 10 minutes he can stop reading and do something else. His mother sits with him while he is reading, coaching and praising his effort: "I'm so proud of how hard you worked to read those pages! I bet you're proud of yourself for being able to do that much reading!" Once Marcus is more independent and self-confident about reading, his mom can eliminate the reward or set a harder goal, such as reading more pages before getting each sticker.

Now consider another six-year-old boy, Ben, who is impulsive, hyperactive and defiant when he doesn't get what he wants. One day while at the mall with his mom, Ben throws a tantrum when she asks him to sit quietly while she speaks with a sales clerk. She responds by offering to take him for ice cream if he stops yelling. In this common scenario: the ice cream is a bribe, not a reward, because it is given *before* the desired behavior has occurred. Misusing rewards in this way undermines Ben's ability to learn how to wait independently and quietly: he's actually learning to use tantrums to get what he wants. A more appropriate way to handle the situation would be to tell Ben he could earn a sticker at each store where he waited quietly by his mother's side, and when he earned four stickers he'd be treated to an ice cream.

I like to describe rewards as a kind of scaffolding that can be removed when the new behavior has a solid foundation. Remember how you supported your baby as he learned to crawl and then walk? Rewards can perform the same role in a child's emotional and social development.