

Using Reward Programmes with Children with Autism

Reward programmes are a useful way of encouraging children's positive behaviours. Reward programmes can take many forms, from simple sticker charts for younger children, to pocket money systems for older children. Your practitioner may have suggested the most appropriate reward programme for your child. The following principles apply to all reward programmes.

- To ensure motivation, goals must be clear and achievable.
- The reward needs to be interesting to the child, and not be available regularly to them. For example, a child will be unlikely to work hard to earn a trip to a fast food restaurant if the family eat there regularly anyway.
- Start small, the child needs to achieve the reward before you make the task more difficult.
- Don't address more than 2 behaviours at a time.
- For children with an ASD, the 'social reinforcement' (statements of pride, congratulations) may not be useful. Instead use a structured reward such as extra play time, trips out or access to favourite activities.
- For children with an ASD, 'group' reward systems (whole class, or all siblings) are not useful and can cause anxiety. Use individual programmes.
- Use a visual cue to help understanding, increase self-esteem and keep an accurate record. This can be in the form of a star chart, points system recorded in a journal or even making puzzle pieces out of a picture and issuing one each time the target is achieved.
- If you lose enthusiasm, so will the child – ensure you visit the reward programme at regular intervals.
- Plan ahead. The reward needs to be given near to the point at which it is earned.
- Reward programmes only work on behaviours you want to see 'more of', the expected behaviours must always be worded positively (e.g. 'using a calm voice' rather than 'not shouting').
- The behaviour to be rewarded must be specific and if necessary time limited (e.g. you will earn a star for brushing your teeth for 2 minutes, or behaving calmly for 1 hour; rather than you will earn a star for being good today).
- If the child has completed the target behaviour, the reward should be given – irrelevant to anything else that is going on. (i.e. if you stated that the child would earn a star for brushing their teeth, and they brushed their teeth and then kicked you they must still get the star).
- You must never, ever remove rewards that have been earned. To a child, there is very little point in working to earn rewards if they can be removed on a whim, and by doing this you are actually reinforcing negative behaviours.