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From sticker charts to mini Mars bars, most of us offer rewards to encourage good behaviour. But how do you avoid treat overload and downright bribery?

"GET THE TRACTOR, MUMMY! I DID A WEE IN THE POTTY,"

shouts Zachary, 2½, dreaming of a shiny new toy that, at this moment in time, is still sitting in the shop.

Like many toddlers, Zachary has got the wrong end of the stick when it comes to the reward system and mum, Sandrine Grillon,

27, from Sheffield, is left with the tricky task of having to explain it to him.

"I've offered to buy him the tractor as a reward, but only when he's got lots of stars on his chart and has slept the night in his own bed," she says. "The problem is he wants to have it every time he does something good – like a wee in the potty or after tidying up –

and that's not the point!" According to parenting expert and author, Karen Sullivan, what rewards to give, and when, are common conundrums for parents of toddlers.

"The problem is that children of this age can't really grasp the concept of delayed gratification," she says. "But don't give up on the star chart – if your toddler

understands that doing things well adds up to a nicer reward in the long run, he'll soon come on board. For mums in Sandrine's situation, the best thing to do is keep it small. Buy some stickers or cars, if that's what he likes, and offer one as an 'instant' reward every time he sleeps in his bed until 6am."

"I want my treat and I want it now!"

One risk with instant rewards, of course, is that your little one can end up expecting one every time he does something good. **MUM'S DILEMMA** "Josh hates having his nappy changed so once, to keep him quiet, my husband, Mark, told him that if he was good he could have a treat. It worked and Joshua let him do it," says **Fiona Ellis**, 33, from Hertfordshire, mum to **Joshua**, 2. "But now he demands a sweet every time he has his nappy changed!"



OUR EXPERT SAYS

"To break the habit, pile all the new nappies into a basket and put a star sticker on a third of them," suggests Karen. "Every time he gets his nappy changed, he'll have to wait to see if he has 'won' a small prize."

"SOON A STAR WASN'T ENOUGH – WE MOVED ON TO DORA STICKERS, THEN FUN-SIZED CHOCOLATE BARS"

"More, please!"

As well as expecting a reward each time they're good, some toddlers demand bigger and better treats each time.

MUM'S DILEMMA "A reward chart was great for toilet training," says **Ruth Cuffe**, 35, from Scotland, mum to **Lara**, 2½. "But soon a star wasn't enough – we moved on to Dora stickers and then fun-sized chocolate bars. It's lucky I have a Mary Poppins style bag, as all hell would break loose if I didn't offer her a reward when we're out and about!"



OUR EXPERT SAYS

"Create a 'lucky dip' treat bag full of small rewards of equal value, such as stickers, sparkly hairbands and snacks. She'll love the mystery – and you're not depriving her of anything because you don't know what's going to come out of the bag either. Be careful about what you offer though – one chocolate button will lead to pleas for more."

"Gimme pudding!"

Dinner time is when many parents dish out the rewards. However, this isn't a good idea according to Karen, as it can backfire.

MUM'S DILEMMA "Noah's going through a fussy phase with food," says **Keiko Takahashi**, 35, from London, mum to **Noah**, 2. "At first, I'll offer him a trip to the swings if he eats up, but when that doesn't work, I say that he can have his favourite ice cream or cake if he eats all his tea."

OUR EXPERT SAYS

"Avoid rewards at mealtimes," advises Karen. "Put the food in front of your toddler and, if he doesn't eat, pay no attention. Don't offer alternatives. All kids go through a fussy phase and they come round sooner rather than later. But if he's offered an ice cream or cake, he'll associate rewards with food, and this can encourage 'comfort' eating and lead to weight problems."

HOW TO MAKE YOUR REWARDS COUNT

- 1 Be clear about what your child has to do to earn his reward, and agree what that reward will be in advance.
- 2 It's always best to keep your rewards small and instant.
- 3 Focus on rewarding specific behaviour. Don't swamp him with treats for a variety of things, as he'll only get confused.
- 4 If your toddler starts to expect a reward every time he does something he considers 'good', try to break the habit by making treats for extra-special behaviour only.

"I'll be good if..."

It's not just at home – rewards can become problematic when you're out and about, too.

MUM'S DILEMMA "If my kids behave well when we're out, I tell them they can have a treat," says **Louise Turley**, from Bristol, mum to **Cleo**, 3½, and **Charley**, 20 months. "But it's virtually impossible to decide on what to give them when they're both shouting demands in my ear."



OUR EXPERT SAYS

"Planning ahead can stop you caving into your child's demands," says Karen. "Pre-arranged treats work best. If toddlers are given free rein, they'll demand things outside your budget."

And what about when, like Louise, you have two or more little ones to reward? "Learning to share is important, but I think rewards have to be individual," says Karen.

When is a reward really a bribe?

We all occasionally feel bad about dishing rewards out, wondering if they aren't just bribes. But there is a difference – whereas a bribe is something you offer your child in the heat of the moment, a reward is something agreed in advance and therefore allows you (in theory, at least!) to stay more in control.

Now, that's something to remember next time your toddler is screaming for the shiny tractor you promised them as a reward... **PP**

click it! For more tips on your toddler's behaviour, visit www.practicalparenting.co.uk

WANTED

If a treat's not enough...

What can you do when you want to reward your tot with a trip to the park, but he just wants chocolate?

"Of course, you want to be in control of the rewards on offer, but be realistic about what your child actually wants in order for it to be effective," advises Karen. "Offer three or four rewards that you're happy with and he'll like, and then ask him to choose from them. That way, he'll be satisfied and you'll know he's choosing something suitable – and not demanding chocolate every time."