

# WHY PROHIBIT THE USE OF FOOD AS A REWARD?

## NOTE ON FOOD REWARDS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:

Rewards are common for all children, but can be a particularly big part of the lives of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Special educators often rely on food as a quick, effective way to reinforce desirable behavior. For this reason, prohibiting the use of food as a reward may have additional challenges.

At Let's Go!, we understand these challenges and recommend that adults who work with children with I/DD start out small by avoiding the use of food as a reward. However, keep in mind that the best practice is to eliminate food rewards completely.

**Rewarding kids with food, even healthy foods, encourages kids to eat outside of meal and snack times,** when they may not be hungry, and can lead to poor eating habits.<sup>1,2</sup>

Using food, such as candy, cookies, doughnuts, sugary drinks, and pizza, as a reward for good behavior and academic performance is a common practice with kids and **puts them at risk for excess weight gain and obesity.**<sup>3,4</sup>

Encouraging kids to eat healthy foods, but at the same time rewarding good behavior with unhealthy foods, **sends a mixed message and confuses kids.**<sup>1</sup>

**Foods that are used as rewards are typically high in sugar, fat, and salt with little nutritional value,** and can play a role in establishing kids' preferences for unhealthy foods.<sup>1,2</sup>

- 1 Puhl RM, Schwartz MB. If you are good you can have a cookie: How memories of childhood food rules link to adult eating behaviors. *Eating Behaviors*. 2003;Vol. 4 (Issue3):283-293.
- 2 Birch LL. Development of food preferences. *Annual Review of Nutrition*. 1999;Vol. 19(Issue 1):41-62. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.nutr.19.1.41
- 3 Kubik MY, Lytle LA, Story M. Schoolwide food practices are associated with body mass index in middle school students. *Arch. Pediatr. Adolesc. Med.* 2005;Vol. 159 (Issue12):1111-1114.
- 4 Dattilo AM, Birch L, Krebs NF, Lake A, Taveras EM, Saavedra JM. Need for early interventions in the prevention of pediatric overweight: a review and upcoming directions. *J. Obes.* 2012.