Creating Reward Menus That Motivate: Tips for Teachers

Rewards are often central to effective school interventions. As possible incentives that students can earn for appropriate school performance or conduct, these reinforcers (or 'rewards') often serve as the motivational 'engine' that drives successful interventions.

Choosing rewards to use as incentives for a student intervention may seem simple and straightforward. A reinforcer, however, probably will not be successful unless it passes three important tests:

- **Acceptability Test.** Does the *teacher* approve of using the reinforcer with this child? Are *parent(s)* likely to approve the use of the reinforcer with their child?
- **Availability Test.** Is the reinforcer typically *available* in a school setting? If not, can it be obtained with little inconvenience and at a cost affordable to staff or parents?
- **Motivation Test.** Does the *child* find the reinforcer to be motivating?

Reward systems are usually *most* powerful when a student can select from a range of reward choices ('reward menu'). Offering students a menu of possible rewards is effective because it both gives students a meaningful *choice* of reinforcers and reduces the likelihood that the child will eventually tire of any specific reward.

However, some children (e.g., those with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) may lose interest in specific reward choices more quickly than do their typical peers. Teachers will want to regularly update and refresh reward menus for such children to ensure these reinforcers retain their power to positively shape those students' behaviors.

Creating a 'Reward Deck.' A Reward Deck is an idea that can help teachers to quickly select and regularly update student reward menus. This strategy involves 5 steps:

1. The teacher reviews a list of reward choices typically available in school settings. (Instructors can use the comprehensive sampling of possible school rewards that appears in the next section: *Jackpot! Ideas for Classroom Rewards.*). From this larger list, the teacher selects only those rewards that she or he approves of using, believes would be acceptable to other members of the school community (e.g., administration, parents), and finds feasible and affordable.

2. The teacher writes out acceptable reward choices on index cards-- to create a master 'Reward Deck'

3. Whenever the teacher wants to create a reward menu for a particular student, he or she first 'screens' reward choices that appear in the master Reward Deck and temporarily removes any that seem inappropriate for that specific case. (For

example, the teacher may screen out the reward 'pizza party' because it is too expensive to offer to a student who has only minor difficulties with homework completion.)

4. The teacher then sits with the child and presents each of the reward choices remaining in the Reward Deck. For each reward option, the child indicates whether he or she (a) likes the reward *a lot*, (b) likes the reward *a little*, or (c) doesn't care for the reward. The teacher sorts the reward options into three piles that match these rating categories.

    The teacher can then assemble that child's Reward Menu using the student's top choices ("like a lot"). If the instructor needs additional choices to fill out the rest of the menu, he or she can pull items from the student's "like a little" category as well.

5. (Optional but recommended) Periodically, the instructor can meet with the student and repeat the above procedure to 'refresh' the Reward Menu quickly and easily.