This question and answer appeared in the Etiquette Daily, the Emily Post Institute Q&A blog, recently. It generated a great discussion with people weighing in on both sides of the question.

Candied Rewards: When teachers hand out treats

My son's new teacher gives kids a few pieces of candy when they get 100 percent on a spelling quiz. I limit his sweets – how can I tell her I'm not crazy about this policy?

First, ask yourself how important this is to you. If you mention the candy rewards to the teacher, there's no guarantee she'll change the policy, especially if it seems to work in motivating the other kids. She may simply opt to give your son a non-candy prize, and that might make him feel self-conscious about being singled out.

If you feel strongly about the issue of candy, though, schedule a time to have a talk with the teacher. Let her know the limits you've established at home, and explain that her rewards are undermining your efforts. Suggest some possible alternatives, such as stickers, a fun pencil, or extra computer time. But speak only for your son – don't insist that she change her approach for the rest of the class. Perhaps if you're very convincing, she'll establish a new reward program that works for everyone.

My comments:

I was a primary school principal and school nurse and teacher for many years before joining my family etiquette business. This question and answer and all the comments took me back in a way that hasn't happened lately.I wanted to comment with each of my different hats on:

As a teacher I can see the desire to motivate my students to do better. However, I would be concerned that there are some children who study hard and are motivated and still won't get 100% on their spelling tests. They may never get that piece of candy. A reward system leaves them out may in time cause a sense of discouragement – just the opposite of it's intent. A 90% for one student may be more indicative of hard work than an 100% for another – but who gets the reward?

As a school nurse/health educator I would never recommend candy as a reward for all the obvious reasons.

As a principal I would not want my staff giving out candy as a reward. There are many parents who chose not to give their kids candy. It puts the student right in the middle – between teacher and parent. It sets up the parent as the meany who won't allow candy and leaves the teacher in an awkward position of perhaps undermining a parent. I was always opposed to parents or teachers "paying kids for good grades." That has little or no educational value. I think it's very important to find ways to motivate students to do well but there are many ways to do that – and many ways that have no additional cost for the teacher: A short note to the parent that can be delivered by the student complimenting his or her great work is probably the best; certain activities in the classroom can function as a reward – for instance, the students who score 100% on the quiz of the day are class leader for the next day, they may be first in line for the day or week, perhaps they can manage the talking stick in groups (if there is such a thing), or lead their small group activity – whatever works in an individual teacher's classroom. I would expect any teacher giving rewards to have a clear system that defines what merits a reward and to select rewards that are either no cost or very inexpensive.

As an etiquette expert:

1. The original question was really "how can I tell her I'm not crazy about this policy?" My answer to that question is "Carefully." Of course she can speak to the teacher. Parents should always feel good about speaking to a teacher – either concerns or compliments. First I would suggest she let her child know she will be talking to the teacher. Then I would advise her to schedule a few minutes to meet with the teacher. She can explain her policy at home and then, as suggested in the answer and several of the comments, participate in finding a solution – what could work in a manner that wouldn't put the child in the middle.

2. One person mentioned that you would not refuse a gift just because you didn't like it. I agree. However, the candy in this case is not a gift. It is a reward for a certain behavior and doesn't carry the same sense that a gift does.

Gift or no, I just don't think it is reasonable to expect a child to refuse it. That puts the onus on the child who then might do less well on tests in order to avoid an awkward situation.

The parent must handle the dilemma and in such a way that she does not criticize the teachers really good intentions.

3. She might, as some of the other commenters suggest, let it go. Her child will be exposed to candy in many situations. She may help her child learn that an *occasional* sweet treat will not be harmful. In this way her child doesn't bear a burden of guilt (if she eats the candy) which will surely lessen the enjoyment the reward was intended to bring.

As you can see, this question and answer brought many issues to my mind. Did it to yours? Please join the conversation. I'd love to hear from you.