

GUIDELINES FOR USING BEHAVIOR CHARTS-2015

by James J. Crist, Ph.D.

Introduction

Using a behavior chart can help increase motivation in children and teenagers who have trouble remembering to start or complete chores or other responsibilities. The following information sheet contains guidelines to help you to use a job chart successfully. Remember that you may have to revise the system, sometimes more than once, to find the combination that works. Do not give up if your first attempt fails. Sometimes, you have to wait before your kids realize that you are serious!

Some parents do not like the idea of using a behavior chart. They believe that children should help out at home and be responsible because that is expected of them. This is true; however, if you are having to consider using a chart, chances are that your child is not behaving responsibly. So a job chart can give added incentive, which is often needed for unmotivated kids or for kids with problems, such as ADHD. They often need more powerful incentives to get them to comply.

Behavior charts have many advantages. They can help children learn to be more responsible, to use their math skills to keep track of points, and to learn to make better choices. Children can even learn to be thrifty shoppers! Earning privileges also increases self-esteem.

Be sure to ask for your child's input on developing a chart. This will help them to feel more invested in the process, and increases the chances that the chart will be successful. Be willing to negotiate and compromise. This also motivates your child to work with you.

The book *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child* has many useful ideas for all kids, not just defiant kids. Some of the ideas in this guide are from this book.

Points To Remember

- You **MUST** be consistent. Payday should be the same time every week. Friday is a good day because that is when most adults are paid, and it is the start of the weekend.
- Both parents should be involved in the process. It won't work as well if only one parent is involved.
- You need to react in a matter-of-fact way to your child's failures on the chart. Praising your child for successes is helpful as well. Remember that your child must want to succeed as much as or more than you want him or her to succeed! Example: "I see you finished a number of chores—great job! You have a few you didn't do—tomorrow's a new day—maybe you'll chose to do them tomorrow and you can earn more points (or money)—it's up to you—I know you can do it!"

- Make sure that your child is not already receiving money or rewards without earning them. This will decrease your child's motivation to do his chores. Such freebies may include video game rental, movies or movie rentals, trips to restaurants, treats at the store, T.V. or computer time, or snacks or sodas. These things need to be earned. Also, don't overdo it on birthdays or holidays—as this too reduces motivation to earn money or points.
- Remember that many behavior problems come and go routinely with kids. Lying, stealing, and tantruming are common at different ages. Not all behavior problems should be addressed using a chart. Redirection and discussion about why such behaviors are wrong may be more helpful, particularly in younger children. Giving minimal attention to negative behaviors (called “extinction”) combined with positive attention given when the negative behavior is not occurring is often sufficient to reduce the frequency of negative behavior.
- Talking about the chart and providing plentiful praise are critical to the success of a chart. So is hugging! Being affectionate with your child increases his or her motivation to please you, which makes it more likely that a behavior chart will be successful.

Starting the Chart

- Decide on a list of chores you want to be completed and behaviors you'd like to see happen more often. It can be as few as three for a very young child, or as many as 10 or 12 for an older child. Some of these items can include routine personal self-care, especially if this is already a problem. Treating people with respect, not hitting, not cussing, etc. can also be used as items on the chart.
- Decide on a point or money value per chore. You can make more important or more difficult items worth more points if you like. This gives you the ability to award partial points for a job that was completed, but not very well. For an item such as no cussing, you could award fewer points for minor cussing, with more points awarded for no cussing whatsoever.
- You can also adjust the point system to make it interesting. For instance, you could award double points for an item on a given day or week. This is the “blue light special at K-mart approach.” This can be helpful if that chore or behavior is not happening often enough.
- Have a set checking time in the evening to check the chart to see what was earned. Even if only one or two things were earned, or even none, continue to check the chart each night. Praise whatever points were earned, and avoid lecturing or criticizing about points not earned. Simply say, “Well, tomorrow is another day if you would like to earn points on that one.”

Giving the Points or Money

You have three options for giving rewards.

- 1) Pick a number of specific rewards (e.g. computer time, movie rental, etc.) and make each reward worth a certain number of points. Some items should be worth fewer points, while others can be worth more. Your child can spend the points that were earned as he or she wishes. One advantage of using points is that your child cannot find extra money from other sources, which would make the system less rewarding.
- 2) However, for many kids money is more rewarding. It also teaches them the value of money. Your child would then have the option of spending the money once payday comes. The Dollar Store is often a good option for buying toys for younger children. A good rule of thumb is to structure the chart so that your child can earn \$1 per week per year old. So an eight year old could theoretically earn eight dollars a week. If this seems to be a bit much, try \$1 for ages 5 or below; \$2-5 for children ages 5-11; and \$5-10 for children ages 12 and up. If you normally give your child much more than this per week, you can increase the amount earned.
- 3) A third choice is to make the points do “double duty.” Points could equal allowance money (e.g. one point is worth a nickel) as well as points to be used to earn privileges. This is especially helpful if your child wants to earn rewards or items that are more costly. Having to save up for one big reward is less likely to help with day-to-day behavior. This is the recommended approach by Dr. Kazdin, such that short-term reward and long-term rewards are both in play at the same time.

Choosing the rewards to be earned

- This is best done with your child. You must learn what is rewarding to your child in order for the system to work. Possible rewards could include playing a game with a parent, going to the park, computer time or video game time, T.V. time, an overnight with a friend, having a friend over, renting a video or video game, going to a ball game, etc. ASK your child.
- Make sure that your child is able to earn at least one of the privileges even if he or she only earns about half of the total number of points. Make different privileges worth different amounts of points.
- If you use money, depending on how much you give, you can require that your child buy his or her own video game rentals, movie tickets, fast food restaurant meals, sodas, and any toys. If your child is willing to save money for a toy, you could offer to match your child’s earnings, so that your child does not have to wait months to buy something. This is especially helpful for items you would like your child to have or activities you’d like to encourage your child to do.

Troubleshooting/When Problems Arise

Behavior charts don't always work, especially at first. This often has to do with how it is set up. Don't expect behavioral systems to work perfectly. It's a work in progress. Possible reasons for the chart not working and helpful suggestions are noted below:

- Rewards aren't meaningful. If so, go back to developing a list of rewards with your child.
- The rewards lose their effectiveness. Mix it up. Use “blue-light special at K-mart,” as noted earlier.
- They have too many other alternative ways to get what they want. Why should they bother to clean their room when they already have every toy and gadget (obtained by gifts, not hard work). You'll need to limit use of those things and limit the availability of items that were not earned.
- Rewards aren't given when promised. This is called extinction. When you stop rewarding a behavior, or do it inconsistently, the strength of the response fades away. Work on being more consistent. People won't work for a paycheck they can't count on.
- Parents aren't consistent. If you don't check the chart daily, if you enforce one day and not another, your child thinks you're not serious about it. If they can get away with not following the system, or take advantage of your not checking it daily, they won't bother to either.
- Parents disagree—or one does all the enforcing and the other lets the kids off or gives the rewards even if not earned. Kids will play parents against each other to get what they want.
- Not enough praise and encouragement is given. Are you pointing out what didn't go well, instead of what did? Example of positive way to praise: “You've done a great job so far—you put all the Legos away and I didn't even have to ask—way to go! Just a couple of more things and you'll be done—can you guess what they are, or do you need a hint?” **EMPHASIS AND EXCITEMENT MUST BE FOR WHAT IS DONE WELL, NOT WHAT IS FORGOTTEN!**
- Teachers aren't consistent in providing feedback. Hard to include school behavior and performance on your chart if you don't know what is going on. Be careful not to reward behavior unless you have verification that it occurred.
- Kids aren't capable of engaging consistently. For example, medication may have worn off after school, or not kicked in when first up in the morning. You may need to change your expectations or timing. Try increasing the frequency of rewards.
- Too much focus on punishment and consequences. This makes kids feel the behavior chart is working against them, not for them. Research says punishment, especially lengthy punishments, doesn't work. "I know you can do it" works better than "you better not forget this time, or no King's Dominion!"
- Child doesn't understand the system. If it is too complicated, your child will get confused and give up in frustration. Keep it simple. Post a list with goals. Ask your child to explain it to you to make sure he or she understands it.

- Home environment is not conducive to completing tasks. For example, it's hard to clean up if there is no place to put things. Try labeling drawers, top to bottom. Be sure you are modeling what is expected in terms of cleanliness at home.

Final Points

- For kids who are motivated to earn more, give them the chance to earn extra money or points. This would include chores or tasks you would not normally expect them to do, e.g. scrubbing floors, washing cars, etc.
- Periodically review the chart with your child to see how it is working. Ask your child's therapist if you need help.
- Have some fun with the chart! Use different colors. Hold contests—for example, you might have a 15 or 30 minute block of time during which some or all items are worth double points. Don't do this too often, though.
- Avoid taking away points as much as possible. If you end up the first week with negative points or money, this will decrease your child's motivation to try the next week. If needed, you can take points for more serious behavior problems such as hitting, but it is generally better to award zero points for hitting and to give points for not hitting. Remember, punishment is less effective at motivating kids.
- Watch your tone of voice. Nagging kids in an irritated tone of voice increases resistance. Using a calm and gentle tone, combined with clear instructions on what you want your child to do, with praise starting as soon as your child starts to comply, works much better.

Sample Charts

Here are a few sample charts. One has items already included, and the other is blank. Feel free to adapt the chart to make it work for you.

JOB CHART FOR WEEK OF _____

Child's Name: _____

Chores	Pts.	Sat.	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.
Make bed								
Put clothes away								
Put toys away								
Take out trash								
Clean up after meals								

School	Pts.	Sat.	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.
Finish homework								
No referrals/time outs at school								
Earning A's or B's								
Writing assignments in agenda								
Studying for quizzes/tests								

Family	Pts.	Sat.	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.
Keeping hands to yourself								
Using polite language								
Do what parents ask you to do								
Giving compliments								
Helping other family members								

Self-care	Pts.	Sat.	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.
Brush teeth in the morning								
Brush teeth before bed								
Take shower or bath								
Put dirty clothes in laundry								

