



"Winning the Candy Wars"

by Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman

Our children are being bombarded with candy from every direction. Chocolate bars, gum, suckers, and assorted gummy candies line the checkout lanes in grocery stores. School fundraisers sell candy bars, cookies, and brownies in the hallways during lunch hours. Every mall, skating rink, soccer complex, movie theater, and even the video store has a place to buy candy.

And then there is the holidays. Halloween trick or treat bags bulge with every kind of candy imaginable. Christmas stockings are topped with bubble gum and chocolate bars. Valentine messages are stamped on candy hearts and boxes of candy are the staple of communicating love. Easter baskets overflow with jellybeans and chocolate bunnies.

Candy is everywhere and its presence wreaking havoc on our children's teeth and waist lines. Children are visiting the dentist with serious tooth decay at younger and younger ages every year. Obesity in children is a national concern.

With candy being universally available and regularly within sight of children, what is a parent to do? How do you combat its influence on your children? How do you lessen the influence of advertisers and get candy consumption under control in your family? How can you win the candy wars?

The following suggestions can assist you in curbing your children's candy consumption. Use them to increase the health and well-being of your family.

1. Begin by being a model for your children to follow.

If you are a chocoholic and find yourself foraging through the cupboard for the last chocolate bar or eating an entire bag of M & M's once they are opened, reflect on the message you are sending your children. It will be difficult for you to curb your children's candy consumption when they see you unable to curb your own. So model the message. Eat a small portion of candy and set the rest aside for later. Talk to your children about your desire and your willingness to stay conscious and make healthy choices about your own candy consumption. The positive images you give them on how to set candy aside will help them to be more likely they are to set it aside themselves.

2. See candy as a wonderful opportunity to set limits with your children.

As parents we set limits around television, computer time, video games, bed times, friends, and a variety of other items. Setting limits with candy does not mean you make it totally off limits. It means that you provide opportunities for your children to enjoy candy within some clearly defined parameters or guidelines.

Children want guidelines. They thrive on structure. It is the structure provided by the adult that allows them, to relax into being a child. Of course they will push and test the limits. That is their job. Pushing and testing the limits does not mean that your children want them changed. It most often means that they want to see if the structure is really in place.

Set your limits early before you go to the store, before the Easter bunny arrives, before the Halloween bags are full, before you bring candy into the house. "We will be buying one treat today in the store," sets the limit. So does, "We are shopping for food today. This will be a non-candy trip."

Discuss with your children how candy consumption will take place before they head out to gather a bag full at Halloween time. Agree on a portion to be eaten each day and a place to keep it. Do not allow candy to be taken into their bedroom. Do not leave bags of candy in the cupboard for easy access. This is part of setting limits and it is your responsibility as a conscious, committed parent to see that it is done.

Setting a limit doesn't mean you have to say, "No." Sometimes saying, "Yes," with a qualifier, helps you avoid power struggles.

"Can I have a piece of candy?"

"Yes, you can have one right after supper."

Another important way to set limits and structure candy consumption in your family while reducing resistance and resentment is to offer children choices.

3. Offer your children choices when it comes to candy consumption.

"You can choose five pieces of candy out of your Halloween bag for today and set the rest aside for a different day. Let's spread all your candy out and look at your choices."

"You can choose one piece of candy now or two pieces of candy for after supper. You decide."

“You can choose to have your Easter basket candy kept in the kitchen cupboard where we can keep track of it or you can choose to be done having access to your candy.”

With candy, remind your children that responsibility equals opportunity. Your children have an opportunity to have some candy. If they are responsible with following the parameters you have set then the opportunity continues. If they choose not to be responsible with candy, they choose to lose the opportunity to have it available. In that instance, access to candy is removed.

This could mean you may have to remove all the candy from the house and make it unavailable to anyone. That would include you.

4. Make the eating of candy something special.

Educate your children that candy is not food. It is junk and has no nutritional value for their bodies. Candy and the opportunity to eat it is something special and are reserved for special moments. Keep candy eating rare and enjoyable. Once the line is crossed and candy becomes an everyday occurrence, specialness of it wears off and its presence is now expected..

Have different candy around at different times to bring attention to the special event that the candy may represent. Focus on the event and how different types of candy are significant at different times of the year. Talk about the cultural or family significance of what a particular type of candy may represent. Change the focus from that of mass consumption to that of significance to you and your family.

5. Don't use candy as a reward.

When you use candy to motivate your children to perform a particular task or behave in a certain way, you are positioning it as a tool of manipulation. Using candy to get children to behave is a form of bribery and produces children who perform for a substance. In this way you end up producing a “candy junky,” someone who chases after the next fix of the desirable substance.

Candy should never be used as a reward by parents, teachers, or any professional working with children. This distorts the role candy should have in a young person's life and teaches children that the reward (in this case candy) is more important than the task performed..

6. Help your children create an inner authority.

You are not always going to be present when your children have access to candy. You are not going to be there to enforce a limit for your children or give them choices. You want the ability to curb candy consumption to already be inside them. This control for within will develop in children if you can start early and consistently utilize the suggestions above.

Another way to help your child build inner controls is to debrief or talk through your child's choices with him after he returns from a place where you know candy is easily available. Help him think about and talk through his decisions. Ask him to articulate what he would want to keep the same and what he would like to different next time. Help him create a plan to build on his successes.

Your child's inner authority is the only authority she will take with her wherever she goes Help her learn to trust her ability to decide and make healthy, responsible choices.

By following these six suggestions you and your children can enjoy the wonderful taste of chocolate and other candies. The holidays can be filled with pleasant moments of special candy consumptions. The "candy wars" will no longer be necessary. Instead, eating candy will move from a weight and tooth decay issue to a wonderful time when one can simply enjoy a sweet taste upon the pallet.

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