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The Marble Jar

Get an empty glass jar and put it on a table or counter where your children can see it. Tell your children that whenever they do something specific (for you to decide) that pleases you, you will put a marble in the jar and when it is full, you will reward them with something special – like going for a picnic or somewhere else fun as a treat. This does not have to be an expensive outing, just something they see as a reward.

Choose just one behaviour you want to work on: for example “responding the first time you call your child”. Tell your child what you would like him or her to do: Every time you look at me the first time I call you I will put a marble in the jar.

The first few days make it quite easy for your child to do well: get close and announce that you are going to call her name, then do it and immediately praise her and make a big fuss about how well she did and that you are putting a marble in the jar. Over time make it a bit more difficult, to train your child to respond when you call her. The first time you do this fill the jar within a week so your children get a reward quickly. Make it easy for them to succeed so that they learn to enjoy being good.

Another behaviour you could choose is “playing nicely together” or “being nice to your sibling”, “being kind or helpful”, “not talking back or not using bad words” – whatever it is that you want your children to practice being good at. Once they have mastered one behaviour you can choose another one for the next week.

It is a good idea to make the marble jar a communal effort for all your children especially if they usually fight or are quite competitive. Praise whoever has done well and put a marble in and encourage the other children to help by doing whatever you are working on.

If your goal is for your children to fight less, catch them when they are playing together nicely even if it is just for a minute and reward that. The idea is to make it a positive experience, that they enjoy being rewarded for their behaviour, so that they want to practice doing this over and over again until it becomes natural to them.

This is a nice little exercise to turn attention to negative behaviour into rewards for positive behaviour. It helps your children practice good behaviour and it helps you as well, to notice and reward the positive, rather than nagging about the negative behaviour.

Have fun!