

# **ROCKS IN THE BASKET:** *Creating a Joyful Environment*

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Repeatedly life teaches us that environment is stronger than willpower. How helpful it is then to create an environment that reflects and encourages positive values and authentic behavior. *Rocks in the Basket* is one technique to help create a positive environment. It helps build our awareness of the positive in the *present moment*. This awareness can help children (and adults) become kinder—and therefore happier—every day. Ultimately, this practice can help us realize the impact of our *own thoughts* on our attitudes, actions, and feelings.

**Materials needed:** one medium-sized basket and fifty small, assorted rocks.

**Step 1: Introduce Rocks in the Basket to your child.** You can say, “Every time I notice something wonderful happening, I’m going to put a rock in the basket. For example, we’re sitting here together and I’m looking at your wonderful face, and I’m going to put a rock in the basket.” You can even buy the basket together and collect the rocks, or else you can choose the rocks and the basket yourself.

Another way to introduce this practice is to simply start acknowledging good energy aloud and putting rocks in the basket, and then you can explain it when your child asks you.

Filling the basket might take a month or two. When the basket is full, you can take out the rocks to count them and to remember why each rock was put in. It is surprising how often children remember the specific positive time associated with each rock. It is important to acknowledge and appreciate these special moments. And then the process begins all over again.

When all the rocks are in the basket, it is time for a celebration! In this case, a celebration is about spending time together with your child (or the family) in a special way. For example, you might go to the beach together, or take a walk in nature. You could spend the morning in your pajamas cooking breakfast and eating it in bed. Or the family could spend an hour having an ice cream party. A celebration is not necessarily about buying something. A good book about celebrations is *I'm in Charge of Celebrations* by Byrd Baylor.

**Step 2: Consider the positive qualities that your child already expresses.** For example, your child might have a high level of energy, cheerful exuberance all day long, and a strong will. Or else your child might often quietly concentrate for long periods of time. Acknowledging this helps you both appreciate the positive aspects of these qualities. For example, high energy can be tiring to deal with all day long, but such energy is truly a positive strength that simply needs refinement with timing, appropriateness, and awareness of one's impact on others. Children flourish when they feel understood and accepted.

Rocks in the Basket is not behavior modification, or a reward promised in exchange for good behavior. For example, "If you get ready on time this morning, I will put a rock in the basket" is a promise for the future; it is not a recognition of the moment. Rocks in the basket should not be used as an incentive; rather, its purpose is to celebrate positive actions or attitudes in the moment.

**Step 3: Consider qualities you'd like you to foster in your child.** These might include willingness, cooperation, and concentration. For example, when you notice your child concentrating on drawing a picture, you could say, "Oh you're concentrating on your great art right now. I'm putting a rock in the basket to celebrate your concentration." It is very helpful to name the quality for your child and to have a discussion occasionally about what the quality means.

You can even anticipate and encourage a response *before* it happens. For example, "I can tell you are almost ready to listen. I am going to put a rock in the basket, because I know you can." Another example is, "I know there is so much great, good energy inside you—even if you just forgot it was there—that I am going to put a rock in the basket." This is the power of having a clear positive expectation that child understands and *knows* how to fulfill (because you've explained it).

You can also put a rock in the basket to acknowledge that your child overcame something that was very difficult. For example, suppose your son has a tantrum before getting in the car to go to school but does finally get in and calms down.

You can say, “What a hard morning we had. You didn’t want to get in the car, and yet you finally did. And now you’re doing just fine. I’m going to put a rock in the basket.” This helps the child grow in the awareness of using will power for self-control. It also acknowledges that hard times pass, which can help (you both) develop patience when in difficult moments.

**Step 4: Have patience, and always a sense of humor!** Be willing to accept the repetition necessary for a child to succeed. It takes time and *repeated practice* for children to learn positive actions and attitudes, and to trust their own experiences. Rocks in the Basket grows in power over months of practice.

On your own, write down a list of qualities that you intend to notice in your child. Watch vigilantly for these qualities during the day and determine to remain positive. You may find that you yourself feel happier as you see and acknowledge the good things in your child. You may also find that your awareness of your own moods increases so that you can accept them more lightly and trust that they will pass. Your child may even put a rock in the basket for *you* upon occasion!

**Step 5: Be authentic.** Make sure that when you put a rock in the basket, the moment you notice is actually happening. It is important for your recognition to be sincere, especially because children have a knack for seeing right through insincerity. Also, you need not exaggerate the positive. Pretending that your child is expressing a quality when she really isn’t, affects your credibility and her trust in the process.

**Step 6: Be aware that Rocks in the Basket is only one technique of many that can help children transform their energy.** We also encourage other approaches when appropriate. For example, we often use conflict-resolution or behavior modification when indicated for some children. Affirmation, energization exercises, concentration techniques, music, and games are also important elements of a joyful environment.

The practice of rocks in the basket ultimately creates a joyful climate, the strength of which becomes greater than the individual efforts needed to build it. It reflects the truth that every moment of our lives contains something to appreciate and something to learn.