

What is reinforcement?

Whether behaviors are ones we appreciate (playing nicely, using language) or ones we don't appreciate (yelling, screaming, hitting, running away), behaviors continue because they are reinforced- they work to get your child something they want!.

How does reinforcement work?

A *reinforcer* is an item or event that follows a behavior (think **Consequence!**) that increases the chance that the behavior will occur again.

We want to encourage appropriate behavior by reinforcing it. Behaviors that are not reinforced will decrease over time. Would you keep showing up for work if you never got paid?

What motivates your child?

Be aware of potential reinforcers for your child, such as things your child wants (food, toys, attention, affection, sights, sounds) or things they want to get away from (unpleasant stimuli/events, tastes, sensations, sounds). Just because you like something, doesn't mean your child likes it or is willing to work hard for it.

Choose the type of reinforcer based upon what motivates your child. If you need help figuring out more about motivation, see *ABCs of Behavior and Learning*.

Different types of reinforcers are:

Social Attention

⇒ Paying a lot of attention to your child's good behavior by giving praise, cheers, hugs, etc. Engaging in fun games like chase and peek-a-boo.

⇒ Do not assume that verbal praise is rewarding for your child.

If praise alone does not increase appropriate behavior, combine it with other things your child likes.

Escape/Avoidance

⇒ Allowing your child to take breaks from demands, playing with others, or over-stimulating situations.

Tangible

⇒ Providing access to items your child likes, such as toys or food.

Sensory/Stimulation

⇒ Providing access to activities your child enjoys, such as allowing your child to spin an item or to spin his/her own body



Choosing reinforcers

How do I pick an effective reinforcer?

Below are some factors to consider when choosing reinforcers:

CONVENIENCE

Choose reinforcers that are readily available to the adult.

Good reinforcers are quick and easy to dispense and enjoy, inexpensive, and natural to the situation where the desired behavior occurs. For example, watching a movie might be used as a reward at home, but at school it might be easier to color pictures or receive stickers of characters from the preferred movie.



ACCESSIBILITY

Choose reinforcers that are not freely available to the child in other settings.

For example, if you are using a special toy to reward calm behavior, make sure the toy is not available to the child at all times, but rather is brought out only when the child is behaving well.

SIZE

The amount of the reinforcer should be rewarding, but should not be large enough that the child doesn't have to exhibit the desired behavior again.

For example, if music is rewarding to the child, it can be played for a few seconds following a desired behavior as a reward. However, if it continues to play throughout the day, the child may not be motivated to repeat the desired behavior (because he or she is already receiving the reward of hearing the music). Likewise, small snacks that can be eaten quickly (e.g., 1-2 Goldfish crackers) are more effective than larger snacks that take a long time to eat (e.g., a lollipop).



Vs.



Delivering reinforcement

How do I use reinforcers to increase appropriate behavior?

Once you have picked an appropriate behavior to encourage, think about the following when using reinforcement:

IMMEDIACY

Deliver reinforcers immediately after the desired behavior has occurred.

Generally, immediate reinforcement is stronger than delayed reinforcement. As children gain maturity and learn how reinforcement works you can teach them to wait but when teaching a new behavior or skill immediate reinforcement will work best.



CONSISTENCY

Deliver reinforcers only after the desired response has occurred.

In the beginning, reward the child every time the appropriate behavior occurs and do not give it for any other reason. As the child demonstrates behavior more frequently, you can reward him or her less often.

VARIETY

Be ready to continually change the reinforcers so the child does not tire of them.

Keep delivering the rewards that appear to motivate your child and change or discontinue the rewards which he/she does not actively seek.



GENERALIZATION

Deliver the reinforcer in as many settings as possible.

Because many children have difficulty generalizing skills across different environments, the desired behavior should be elicited and rewarded in a variety of settings (e.g., in different locations, with different people, at different times of day).

