

## Extinction

Behaviors that are consistently reinforced are more likely to occur in the future. The opposite is also true. Behaviors that consistently receive no reinforcement are less likely to occur in the future. Therefore, some problem behaviors can be eliminated simply by never reinforcing them. Generally, your attention is the social reinforcement you must withhold in order to eliminate some childhood problems.

The process of withholding your attention to eliminate selected problem behaviors is called extinction. Extinction is an appropriate term because without the reinforcement it needs to survive, the undesirable behavior is “extinguished”. A word of caution: Good behavior can be extinguished also if you fail to reinforce it. Remember to praise your child when he/she behaves appropriately.

Not all misbehaviors can be eliminated using extinction. In some cases, it is too difficult to eliminate all the reinforcement. A child may be reinforced in many different ways for using undesirable behavior. Siblings may reinforce fighting by giving up toys to avoid getting hurt. You would not expect a sibling to ignore fighting. Parents may reinforce noncompliance by not requiring a child to do chores when they complain. It is possible to ignore noncompliance. Unfortunately, other reinforcers (like avoiding the chore) cannot be withheld. Ignoring child noncompliance usually makes it worse. A child may be reinforced by a sibling’s attention when clowning around at the dinner table. You cannot expect young children to ignore a sibling’s silly behaviors.

It would be impossible for a parent to eliminate every form of possible reinforcement for every undesirable behavior. If one form of reinforcement remains, or if the child is reinforced some of the time, extinction will be ineffective. The undesirable behavior will persist.

Some misbehavior, however, responds well to extinction. These are the behaviors which are reinforced by your attention. With practice, you can learn to withhold all of your attention from these behaviors so that they will be extinguished. Behaviors that respond well to extinction are:

1. Whining
2. Complaining
3. Arguing
4. Pouting
5. Verbal Refusals (Saying “no”)

### Ignore Every Time

The most important thing to remember when using extinction is to ignore the behavior every time it occurs. If the behavior is not ignored every time, it is being reinforced part of the time. Reinforcing a behavior part of the time can make the behavior even stronger than it was originally. Psychologists call this a “partial reinforcement schedule”.

**Partial reinforcement is the most powerful way to maintain responses.** Example: Gamblers at a slot machine.

Often ignoring will cause undesirable behavior to increase temporarily before it extinguishes. Psychologists call this an “extinction burst”. The child simply tries harder when the reinforcement doesn’t come. It takes time to learn new behaviors. It is natural that the first thing a child will try when the child no longer receives reinforcement for a behavior is more of the same behavior. Fortunately, this will only be a temporary problem if the behavior is ignored every time.