

Positive Reinforcement for Children

Reinforcements for a child are often found in the behaviors of another. The “little things” matter: close attention, a touch, words of approval, a smile of acceptance, a friendly glance, and a kiss – these are all examples of social reinforcement.

They cost nothing to give. They occur hundreds of times each day.

There are some people who just seem naturally good at reinforcing others. They have a knack of making people glad to be around them. A parent should be that person to a child. You cannot reinforce too much. You cannot spoil a child with too much social reinforcement. Don't be afraid to reinforce all appropriate behavior.

Social Reinforcement at Work

A single reinforcement does not produce long-term change. It takes hundreds of consistent reinforcements to produce change. For example: Suppose you want to teach your child to eat vegetables. Praising the child just once will probably not successfully reinforce the behavior. However, if the child consistently watches you enjoy vegetables and receives approval for eating vegetables, that child will likely learn to enjoy veggies.

Behavior does change. However, behavioral change is gradual and most likely to occur if reinforcement is consistent during early stages of learning. If you want to teach your child to put their things away the first thing to consider is your example. **You are the primary model for your child.** Children tend to follow the modeling of their parents. If both parents consistently put their things away, this increases the likelihood that the child will do the same. But this will likely not be enough. When the child puts things away, prompt social reinforcement will strengthen that behavior.

Instruction cues (“Please, put your things away.”) also help. When the child complies, supply immediate social reinforcement such as, “Thank you”. Remember to notice when the behavior occurs and always (or as much as possible at first) reinforce. Just once will not bring long-lasting change. It is likely to take several weeks or months of consistent reinforcement on your part. Once the behavior is more consistent, you can begin to cut down on the consistency of the reinforcements. You will no longer need to remember to notice and praise each time the behavior occurs.

Reinforce Immediately and Often

When you see a behavior you like, immediately reinforce it. Many parents notice when a child misbehaves but they believe their approval will “spoil” the child. This will not happen with social reinforcers. Many parents believe that a child ought to behave properly because that is what children are supposed to do. It is true that well-raised children eventually internalize rules and value behaviors they have learned. However, when children are developing, they depend upon parents and others around them to provide external motivators.

Even after the child has learned to regularly engage in new behavior, you should never take the behavior for granted. If you like what your child is doing, praise the child. It isn't necessary to go over-board. A smile, a thank-you, a statement of pleasure or pride is often all that is needed.

Reinforce Small Steps toward the Goal

If the words “immediate” and “often” summarize the first two points, the phrase “small steps” would characterize the third. How do you really teach a child to “clean up a mess”? If you were to wait until your child gets the entire room clean, it may never happen. Room cleaning is a very complex task with dozens of small steps required to reach the goal. Those small steps are the points along the way where you can reinforce the child.

Reinforce your child for starting and then for each step toward the goal. This process is called “**shaping**”. It consists of two procedures.

First, decide what it is that you wish your child to do. Second, decide on the steps necessary to arrive at this point and break them down into small, specific units. Let's take as an example the goal of hanging up a coat. The steps that you could reinforce are: 1. taking off the coat; 2. taking the coat to the coat rack; 3. hanging the coat on the hook. A favorite social reinforcer is, “That's a good start!”

Reinforce Improvement

Imagine a child has been told to get dressed. The child puts on shirts and pants, but the shirt is not tucked in and his shoes and socks are not on. The parent scolds the child for not getting dressed, rather than praises the child for what has been accomplished and offering help for difficult tasks. This is an example of **coercion** for less than perfect behavior.

The result of this program will likely be the child resisting the process of getting dressed in the future. The error lies in the punishment and lack of reinforcement. The parent, by scolding the child for less than perfect performance, is training the child to stop trying (to be helpless). The parent is working against the established goal – to help the child learn to get dressed.

Other Positive Reinforcers

Social reinforcement is the most commonly used form of positive reinforcement with young children.

There are, however, two other classes of positive reinforcement; activity and material reinforcers.

Activity reinforcers involve allowing the child to engage in a desired activity. During free time, children can choose what they want to do. Simply allowing “free time” is often an excellent reinforcer. With young children, psychologists often recommend a “work-before-play” contingency to parents. In this case, working is required before allowing the child free time. **Material reinforcers** involve prizes, treats, money, or any other ‘thing’ a child might work to earn.

Both activity and material reinforcers can be very motivating, even with young children. However, using these forms of positive reinforcement for typical socialization tasks (obedience, sharing, manners, inhibition of aggression, and control over emotion) is not advised. Several problems exist. First, there is a response cost to you for using these reinforcers. Materials cost money and activities require coordination of time. In contrast, social reinforcers are free. Second, you often give these reinforcers on a delayed basis. For example, a trip for an ice cream cone earned by chore completion cannot usually be provided immediately. Young children are not well motivated by delayed reinforcers. Preschoolers do not plan well, do not count well, and do not think about the future. Third, children may “bargain” with you for better prizes after they tire of your original offer. For example, a child may refuse to obey until you give the child a better deal! Fourth, a child may choose to violate rules or refuse to perform needed chores because the only consequence is loss of a prize the child didn’t get in the first place. Fifth, the systems are uncommon. Most preschool children are raised without the routine use of a prize system. When psychologists use prize systems, it is usually with grade-school children who are not responsive to social reinforcers and who need a temporary, artificial positive reinforcement system.

It is okay to give your children treats, take them to activities, and do fun things with them. We want you to! Just don’t rely on treats and prizes and trips to motivate routine but important behaviors like obedience or chore completion.

Summary

1. Social Reinforcers are little things that you can do at any time; such as smiling, paying attention, praising, and hugging.
2. Make social reinforcement contingent on good child behavior. Reinforcement will only strengthen a behavior if it is given following the behavior and withheld when the child is not engaging in appropriate behavior.
3. Socially reinforce immediately after the behavior occurs. It is not necessary to wait until the behavior is completed.
4. Socially reinforce every time the behavior occurs for behaviors that are just being learned. Once the behavior has become more consistent (usually after several weeks), then reinforce less often.

5. Reinforce small steps toward a goal. Children need encouragement for effort. Reinforce improvement; reinforce effort; reinforce a good start.
6. Long term changes in behavior occur gradually and are the result of many consistent social reinforcements.
7. Activity and material reinforcers can be motivating. Routine use of these positive reinforcers with young children should be limited.

Adapted from Patterson (1976) and Heeder (1990)