

Reinforcement

Definitions:

Reinforcement: The presentation or removal of something immediately following a response/skill, which increases the likelihood that the response/skill will occur again (Alberto & Troutman, 2003).

Reinforcer: Something presented or removed after a skill/behaviour that increases the likelihood the skill behaviour will occur again (Alberto & Troutman, 2003).

Rationale:

Many typically developing children are internally motivated to learn new skills/activities and can be motivated by social praise. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) may not be motivated in the same manner. In order to promote their learning it is important to determine what is motivating for them and to provide opportunities for them to earn reinforcement.

Also Known As:

- Motivating a child
- “Catching” the child being good
- Praise

You’re already doing it by:

- Giving your child kisses/tickles
- Providing them with an opportunity to earn an allowance
- Outing to a movie or favourite restaurant
- Saying “Great job!”

Effective Reinforcement Practices:

- **Immediate:** Don’t delay the reinforcer. Timing is everything! **Contingent:** Only give the reinforcer when you see the skill.
- **Enthusiastic:** Be enthusiastic!
- **Paired:** Pair with praise and be descriptive.
- **Frequent:** The reinforcer should be given more often when teaching new skills.
- **Effective:** The reinforcer used leads to an increase in the desired skill.
- **Brief:** Reinforcers should be brief!

(Alberto & Troutman, 2003)

Consider this when trying to reinforce:

- When giving a reinforcer, pair it with social praise
- Decide on the skill/behaviour to increase.
- Make a list of items/activities that the child likes
- Use your child’s special interests

Reinforcement

Consider this when trying to reinforce:

- Offer choices (variety is the spice of life)
- Watch the effectiveness of reinforcers
- Reinforcers should be gradually faded
- Describe the skill/behaviour being reinforced
- Reinforcers are different for everyone
- What is reinforcing on one day may not be on another
- Limit access to reinforcers used to teach skills

Token Economies:

A token board is a visual reward system which allows a child to clearly see what he will receive after completing a certain amount of work. In the example shown (left), the child needs to earn 3 tokens before being allowed to earn their chosen reinforcer, e.g. watching a video of Cars. Token boards teach delayed gratification, and allow a child to feel in charge of what reward he/she will be receiving (Retrieved from <http://www.silverliningmm.com/tokenframe.htm>, 2012).

Remember...

Many typically developing children are internally motivated to learn new skills/activities or can be motivated by such things as praise. Children with ASD may not be motivated in the same manner. In order to teach new skills and promote their learning it is important to determine what is motivating for them.

Frequently Asked Questions:

How does reinforcement work with other children in the home?

Parents are often concerned about the fairness of providing one child with more reinforcement than their other siblings. One way to view this is to remember that fair does not mean equal. Fairness means everyone gets what they need to succeed. In order to be successful, children with ASD typically require reinforcement. Having all your children work towards a special treat, or implementing a token system for all your children can also be an effective way to motivate them within your home.

Isn't using reinforcement to strengthen a skill/behaviour the same as bribery?

The difference between reinforcement and bribery is that reinforcement comes after a task is completed where as bribery is offered before.

Nothing motivates my child.

Some children with ASD have unique interests which may not be obvious. It may be beneficial to observe your child in the home and community to see what activities, people, toys, and food they prefer. You may also gather information from other people involved with your child, e.g., your day care provider, relatives, teachers, etc. Talking to your child or watching him/her during free time will also provide you with additional information about their preferred activities/items. When gathering information, keep in mind the following *three types of reinforcers*: tangible reinforcers (food, objects), activity reinforcers (preferred events, listening to a CD), and social reinforcers (praise, attention)

Frequently Asked Questions Continued:

I always praise my child but he still hasn't learned how to brush his teeth.

Since verbal praise is motivating to most typically developing children we often assume it will be equally reinforcing for our children with ASD. Instead, try creating a list of items or activities that he/she can choose to work for. Also, when beginning to teach a new skill, it may be necessary to break down the new skill into smaller steps and reinforce more frequently for small successes slowly working towards the goal. For example, putting the toothbrush up to his/her mouth (reinforce), putting toothpaste on brush (reinforce), or brushing their teeth for 10 seconds (reinforce), etc.

References:

Alberto, A.A., & Troutman, A.C. (2003). *Applied behavior analysis for teachers*. (6th edition). NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall. <http://www.silverliningmm.com/tokenframe.htm>, 2012

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Description of Potential Reinforcers	LIKES			
	Very Much	Much	A little	Not at all
Tangible				
Action figures				
Blocks				
Food (*caution allergies)				
Activities				
Classroom helper				
Cooking				
Extra recess time with friend				
Social				
Applause				
High five				
Being Praised				
Tokens				
Bingo chips				
Graph progress on chart				