



Positive Reinforcement

Definition

Positive reinforcement is a procedure whereby a student, contingent upon performing a specific behavior, is immediately rewarded to maintain or increase that behavior.

Nondefinition

Are we suggesting that you bribe students? No! Most of the time when we hear the word "bribery," we think of people being bought off to do something illegal, corrupt, or unethical. Instead, positive reinforcement increases the chances that a student will do something appropriate that will benefit him in the future. We are suggesting that you use procedures that encourage, support, and empower students to achieve positive outcomes in school and in the community.

Things to Do

- ✓ Select and define a behavior to increase.
- ✓ Choose reinforcers.
- ✓ Deliver positive reinforcement.
- ✓ Monitor student performance.



Select and define a behavior to increase.

Select the Behavior

Always specify the behavior to be increased before initiating a behavior change or academic program for a student. Use *descriptive* rather than *vague* or *ambiguous* terms. For instance:

VAGUE OBSERVABLE & MEASURABLE

"Peter will behave when standing in line."

"Peter will keep his hands and feet to himself while standing in line for the bus."

Define the Behavior

After selecting the behavior(s), instructors must define the behaviors in "observable and measurable" terms. In other words, student behavior that you can see and measure. For example, "Karla should show more respect" fails to identify when and under what conditions the behavior will occur. Instead, "When the instructor gives a direction, Karla will comply within 4-5 seconds" is a behavior that you can see and count.



Choose reinforcers.



Edible Reinforcers

- Bananas
- Cookies
- Cereal
- Cubes of Jell-O
- Raisins
- Candy
- Pudding
- Soda
- Juice

WATCH OUT!!! Not everyone likes the same thing. It's important to individualize the reinforcers. One way is to provide students a menu of edibles. These are items that students like best and instructors can easily make available. Periodically rotate in different foods to maintain student interest.

Menu

- Remember, start by using the most nutritious food.
- Use caution with younger children who may choke on smaller foods, such as raisins or grapes.
- Also, be sure to check with parents regarding students' food allergies or other medical problems, such as diabetes.
- Overall, edible reinforcers are highly effective for students who initially require immediate reinforcement in smaller amounts. However, to avoid dependence on edible reinforcers, pair or simultaneously use the reinforcer with a praise statement. Through pairing, the student gradually becomes motivated by praise alone.



Sensory Reinforcers

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen to music on a Walkman View a television scene Sit in a rocking chair Select a perfume Put a stuffed animal Use a back scratcher Burn incense Touch balloons Blow bubbles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chew a pastrer Smell soap Play a CD in a boom box Blow party noisemakers Rub on a hand lotion Collect glow-in-the-dark bugs Use a vibrator See cartoons on a simulator |
|---|---|

These are things you can hear, see, smell, or touch.

Like all reinforcers, these are most effective when they are appropriate for the student's **age, interest, and ability** level.



Natural Reinforcers

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playing a game Watching a movie Reading a comic book Free time with a friend Shooting baskets Access to school vending machines Handing out calculators | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Erasing the blackboard Being a team captain Putting up a bulletin board Operating equipment Being an office assistant Shaving up late Sitting next to a friend |
|---|--|

An easy way to identify natural reinforcers is to *watch* what students enjoy doing during free time. Or better yet, watch carefully and keep track of what they most often **ask** to do. Natural reinforcers are also **privileges**—everyday things we often take for granted.

Remember, the reinforcement should **match the effort** required to earn it.



Material Reinforcers

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stickers Pencils Bookmarks Erasers Trading cards Movie tickets Food coupons Clay Cassette tapes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CDs Plastic arts Wax teeth Hand buzzer Disappearing ink Magic tricks Marls Trick candy or gum |
|---|--|

In contrast to natural reinforcers, material reinforcers are usually more effective for students who initially require **immediate reinforcement in smaller amounts**. Again, pair the reinforcer with a praise statement. Through pairing, the student gradually becomes motivated by praise alone.

You can find more unique material reinforcers in costume shops, flea markets, magic or trick shops, and novelty stores.



Generalized Reinforcers

- Raffle tickets
- Tokens
- Poker chips
- Points
- Credits

A generalized reinforcer is any item that can later be exchanged for something of value. This is an excellent method to help students delay gratification.



Social Reinforcers

- A smile
- A wink
- A nice compliment
- Effective praise
- Proximity

Social reinforcers are very effective when used alone. However, they are often paired or used simultaneously when giving other reinforcers. Through pairing, as student gradually becomes motivated by social reinforcers alone as other forms of reinforcement are faded.

When giving praise, use the I-FEED-V rule. This means praise the student "immediately" after the target behavior occurs, "frequently," and "enthusiastically"—especially when working on a new behavior. Also, be sure to use "eye contact" and specifically "describe the target behavior." Finally, use a "variety of praise statements."

When choosing reinforcers, always follow the golden rule: *Select reinforcement that doesn't cost a lot and doesn't take too much time to deliver.*

Golden Rule

To keep your sanity
and save a dime . . .

choose inexpensive reinforcers
that require little time.

Select reinforcement that doesn't cost a lot and doesn't take too much time to deliver.

EFFECTIVE PRAISE

ImmEDIATELY
FREQUENTLY
ENTHUSIASTICALLY
EYE CONTACT
DESCRIBE BEHAVIOR
VARIETY

✓ Deliver positive reinforcement.

When teaching new skills or behaviors, make sure the student understands what behavior is required to earn the reward. Then, *each time* he performs the behavior, *immediately* reinforce him. Timing is everything. The *shorter* the delay between the behavior and reinforcer, the greater the chance the behavior will be strengthened or increased. In contrast, the *longer* the delay between the behavior and reinforcer, the greater the risk that another behavior will be inadvertently reinforced. Instructors use the following schedules to deliver reinforcement.

Continuous Schedule of Reinforcement

Continuous reinforcement is time consuming but necessary when teaching a *new* skill. Be aware that satiation may occur when a student tires from continuous use of one reinforcer. To avoid this dilemma, use a *menu* of reinforcers. Once the student's behavior is well established, reduce the frequency of reinforcers by shifting from a continuous to an intermittent or unpredictable schedule. An intermittent schedule is designed to maintain and strengthen the behavior.

Intermittent Schedule of Reinforcement

Once the behavior has been well established, it is important to introduce a systematic delay between the behavior and the reinforcer. Intermittent schedules maintain the newly learned behavior by keeping the student guessing when the next reinforcement will occur.

- △ For example, a supervisor intermittently reinforces Kristy every 2 to 3 minutes. Gradually, the supervisor moves to every 5 to 7 minutes and so on—until Kristy experiences a rate of reinforcement typical in her work environment.

Another kind of intermittent schedule reinforces the student after performing the target behavior an *average number of times*.

- △ For instance, Tiana has learned to complete her seat work problems. To increase her independence, the instructor moves from a continual to an intermittent schedule. At first, the instructor reinforces Tiana every time she completes an average of two to three problems. Then, on an average of every four to five problems and so on—until Tiana experiences a rate of reinforcement typical in her classroom.

These two examples of intermittent schedules help individuals delay gratification and maintain the appropriate behavior over a longer period of time. For additional information, see *Variations of the Technique*.

✓ Monitor student performance.

The only way to know if a reinforcer is working is to observe the student's behavior over time to determine if it is increasing. By collecting data on the student's performance, instructors can easily evaluate the value of the reinforcers and make adjustments as needed.

Check Target Behaviors

If desired behaviors fail to increase, check the target behaviors. Are they well defined, and do students and staff understand them?

Check Reinforcers

Also, check the reinforcers. Are there too many? Too few? Are they valued?

Check Staff Consistency

Finally, check that all staff are administering reinforcement consistently. Is reinforcement occurring at a sufficient level to maintain the behavior? Perhaps adjustments need to be made.

Examples

Example 1

A history instructor was interested in increasing a junior high student's appropriate classroom behaviors (e.g., arriving to class on time, bringing necessary materials, beginning work on time). The instructor observed that the student

would always rush to the snack machine in the lunchroom. The instructor made use of the machine contingent upon the earning of a predetermined number of points for appropriate behavior.

Example 2

A young student was fascinated with invisible ink markers. During each instructional session that the student earned 8 out of 10 possible points, the student could use the markers for 3 minutes.

Example 3

Instead of providing a student with a star for every math answer written on the practice sheet,

the paraeducator delivered a star for approximately every third problem that was completed by the child. Sometimes a star was awarded after two answers and at other times only after four answers. The paraeducator also gave specific praise, such as, "Wow you're working fast!" "What a wizard!" or "You're too fast for me!" whenever a star was awarded. Providing reinforcement on a variable schedule kept the student on his toes as he was never quite sure when he would receive a star from the paraeducator.

Variations of the Technique

Schedules of reinforcement

See table on next page.

Spinner

Try placing a menu of reinforcers on a spinner. The smaller wedges represent the more popular or expensive items, while the larger wedges are usually less costly and easier to provide. The spinner adds an element of chance that students love and is often motivation in itself.

Grab bag

Each time a student meets a goal, such as completing a math assignment, the student gets to connect a dot on the chart. When a designated dot is reached, the student selects an item from the grab bag.

Potential Problems and Solutions

Behavior Does Not Increase

If the behavior failed to increase, there was not positive reinforcement. There are several strategies for selecting reinforcement. These include:

- Watching the student to determine what she likes to do or what activities the student engages in during free time, leisure time, etc.
- Asking the student what he would like to earn on a reinforcer checklist (a list of potential reinforcers).
- Using a reinforcer menu containing pictures of potential reinforcers for students who have difficulty communicating their needs and wants.
- Allowing students access to potential reinforcers by displaying items for a brief period each day.
- Building a reinforcer menu that consists of items frequently selected by students.

Schedules of Positive Reinforcement

Schedule	Description	Example	Advantage	Disadvantage
Continuous	Every response is reinforced.	Every time the student says "please" when making a request, the teacher smiles and praises the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New learning occurs quickly. • Student may become satiated. • New behaviors can be shaped. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming. • Student may become satiated. • When continuous reinforcement is stopped, the behavior may extinguish quickly.
Intermittent	Some, but not all, of the appropriate responses are reinforced.	When the student says "please" when making a request, sometimes the teacher smiles and praises the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains well-established behavior over time. • Behaviors are more resistant to extinction. • Student learns to delay gratification. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not effective for teaching new behaviors.
Ratio Schedule of Reinforcement	Reinforcement is made contingent upon a specific number of correct or appropriate responses.	<p>Fixed Ratio The student must make three requests using the word "please" before being reinforced.</p> <p>Variable Ratio The student may be reinforced on the average of every three requests. Thus, he may be reinforced following four requests using the word "please" or following two appropriate requests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds a high response rate. The higher the ratio, the higher the rate. • Because of its unpredictable reinforcement schedule, the student's rate of responding remains essentially constant and resistant to extinction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An irregular burst of responding can occur if the reinforcement is stopped. • Not effective for teaching new behaviors.
Interval Schedule of Reinforcement	Reinforcement occurs following a specific amount of time and the occurrence of one appropriate response.	<p>Fixed Interval After 5 minutes has passed, the teacher reinforces the next request in which the student uses the word "please."</p> <p>Variable Interval The student receives reinforcement on the average of every 5 minutes for using the word "please" when making a request. Sometimes the reinforcement occurs after 3 minutes or sometimes after 6 minutes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of implementation. • Ease of implementation. Because the time intervals are of different lengths, the student never knows which response will be reinforced. This unpredictability creates a steady pattern of responding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student stops performing following the reinforcement and begins to work again just prior to the next reinforcement period. • Not effective for teaching new behaviors.

Satiation

Satiation is when a student grows tired of the reinforcement, and the power of the reinforcer diminishes. An instructor may choose to do one or more of the following things to prevent or delay satiation:

- △ Shorten the instructional session in which the reinforcer is being used.
- △ Decrease the size or amount of the reinforcer.
- △ Switch to an alternative reinforcer.
- △ Have an array of reinforcers from which to choose.

Student Does Not Maintain or Generalize the Behavior

Change the schedule of reinforcement. Gradually move from reinforcing each response to an intermittent schedule. Continue to generously use social reinforcement.

Getting Ready

Obtain parental and administrative support for the reinforcement you intend to use.

Materials and Supplies

- △ Some type of monitoring form or data sheet to record the number of appropriate behaviors the student is performing. Use this data to determine if the reinforcement is effective.
- △ A reinforcement checklist to assist instructors in determining effective *individualized* reinforcers for students.
- △ A supply of natural, material, sensory, and/or edible reinforcers that have been identified as reinforcing.
- △ A menu of reinforcers to provide variation and maintain student interest.



References

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- Fister, S. L. (1994). *Meeting the behavioral needs of students: A guide for administrators and program planners*. Des Moines, IA: Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center.
- Hall, R. V., & Hall, M. C. (1980). *How to select reinforcers*. Lawrence, KS: H & H Enterprises.
- Rhode, G., Jenson, W. R., & Reavis, H. K. (1992). *The tough kid book*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

REINFORCER CHECKLIST

Student _____ Date _____

Grade _____ Person Completing Form _____

Please answer YES or NO if the item or activity is something you (the student) would like to earn as a reward for working hard in school.

ACTIVITIES

Video Game	YES	NO	Basketball	YES	NO
Swimming	YES	NO	Magazine	YES	NO
Watch Video/DVD	YES	NO	Drawing	YES	NO
Walking	YES	NO	Field Trips	YES	NO
Comic Books	YES	NO	Puzzles	YES	NO
Play Dough	YES	NO	Board Game	YES	NO
Craft Activities	YES	NO	Card Game	YES	NO

Please list any favorite activities or special favorites that you may have

MATERIALS

Stickers	YES	NO	Erasers	YES	NO
Special Pencils	YES	NO	Bubbles	YES	NO
Lotions	YES	NO	Play Dough	YES	NO
Colored Pencils/Crayons	YES	NO	Rings	YES	NO
Free Tardy Pass	YES	NO	Puzzles	YES	NO
Bookmarks	YES	NO	Trading Cards	YES	NO
Action Figures	YES	NO	Small Toys	YES	NO
Free Assignment Pass	YES	NO	Necklaces	YES	NO

Please list any favorite items or special favorites that you may have

FOOD

Small one-bite Candies	YES	NO	Cereal	YES	NO
Larger Candy	YES	NO	Fruit	YES	NO
Vending Machine Drink	YES	NO	Pretzels	YES	NO
Juice/Punch	YES	NO	Potato Chips	YES	NO
Vegetables & Dip	YES	NO	Corn Chips	YES	NO
Crackers	YES	NO	Cookies	YES	NO
Donuts	YES	NO	Bagels	YES	NO
Candy Bars	YES	NO	Cheese	YES	NO

Please list any favorite name brands or special favorites that you may have

SOCIAL

Pat on the Back	YES	NO	Verbal Praise	YES	NO
Extra PE/Gym Time	YES	NO	Free Time	YES	NO
Games w/Teacher	YES	NO	Field Trips	YES	NO
Games w/ Friends	YES	NO	Special Seat	YES	NO
Lunch w/ Friends	YES	NO	High Five	YES	NO
Visit w/ Friends	YES	NO	Awards	YES	NO

Please list any favorite activities or special favorites that you may have

Rank the top 5 incentives from the lists above:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



Interest-Based Everyday Literacy Activity Checklist

Young children learn to listen, talk, read, and write as part of their involvement in interesting activities. Inside you'll find a list of everyday activities that your child and your family might do as part of your home and family life. Please mark (✓) the activities that are your child's interests or that might be interesting for your child.

Child's Name _____ Date of Birth _____ Today's Date _____



Interest-Based Everyday Literacy Activity Checklist

This activity...	Is my child's interest	Would be interesting to my child	This activity...	Is my child's interest	Would be interesting to my child
Adult and child playtimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Having "conversations" with a doll or stuffed animal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attending children's concerts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Having pretend phone conversations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attending puppet shows	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Helping mom or dad "read" favorite stories	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attending religious/spiritual services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Holiday dinners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attending religious activities for children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to bedtime stories	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Being part of mealtime conversations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to or singing music/favorite songs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child/parent book reading times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to nursery rhymes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Choosing books at the library	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to or saying prayers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cooking or preparing meals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to storytellers/story times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cutting/tearing pictures from a magazine or catalog	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to religious or spiritual readings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dictating letters or shopping lists	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to TV phrases/jingles	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doing art activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Looking at alphabet books	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drawing in sand or dirt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Looking at books like "Mother Goose" or "Dr. Seuss"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eating out	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Looking at catalogs, magazines, or newspapers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family gatherings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Looking at family photos or favorite pictures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family talks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Looking at picture books	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Going food shopping	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Making a shopping list or "to do" list	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Going on a neighborhood walk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Going to library/bookstore story times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Going on nature walks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			