



Reinforcement

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Reinforcement is one of the most powerful strategies available for teaching your child. A reinforcer is anything your child enjoys (praise, hugs, candy, preferred toys, etc.) that increases the probability that the behavior will increase or happen again when provided following the occurrence of a behavior. For example, your child points to a cookie. You hold the cookie in front of the child and tell her, “Say cookie.” When she says “cookie,” you praise and give her the cookie. Using the cookie as a reinforcer for language increases the chance that the child will say “cookie” next time she wants a cookie.

We often hear the words reinforcer and reward used interchangeably. However, they have different meanings. **A reinforcer is something that is known to increase the occurrence of a behavior, while a reward is something that may not necessarily increase the behavior.** Therefore, reinforcers are rewards, but rewards may not necessarily be reinforcers. For this reason, we must be careful in how we reward children. In other words, when we want to increase a behavior, we need to be sure the items we choose are items the child is willing to work for (i.e., that the items are reinforcing). It is also important to remember that what is reinforcing for one child may not be reinforcing for another. The items that act as reinforcers for your child’s behavior will also change over time. Because of this, it is important to rotate reinforcers, so your child does not get tired of one reinforcer too quickly. Similarly, it is important that your child does not have free access to the items you are using for reinforcers. If Play-Doh is a reinforcer and your child can play with Play-Doh all day long, then your child will be less likely to work for Play-Doh (i.e., it will lose its reinforcing value).

We must also be careful in how we use reinforcers. We can accidentally reinforce negative behaviors in children. For example, if your attention is a reinforcer for your child and you respond to negative behaviors with attention (even with verbal reprimands such as, “Don’t do that”), you may actually increase the likelihood that your child will exhibit the inappropriate behavior again. In addition, for the child who does not like to comply with





adult requests, time-out for misbehavior during demands may reinforce the misbehavior because it allows the child to escape the request.

One very important way to impact your child's behavior is to **“catch them being good.”** The idea behind this is that attention is a reinforcer for most children. So, when you reinforce your child's good behavior by providing them with praise and attention, you teach them what you want them to do and increase the likelihood that they will do that good behavior again. When you “catch your child being good” and respond by telling them exactly what they are doing that is good, you are teaching your child how you want them to behave. Instead of just saying, “Nice job!” tell your child exactly what you liked about what they did, “Nice job sharing your truck, Jake!”

Another strategy for using reinforcement is called Differential Reinforcement of Other Behavior (DRO). With this procedure, we use attention and other things your child enjoys reinforcing the absence of misbehavior. When using this strategy, it is important to specifically define misbehavior (e.g., aggressions such as hitting, kicking, and biting). In addition, we need to determine how often misbehavior occurs. For example, does your child engage in aggressive behavior once a day, once an hour, or once a minute? Based on that information, we determine the interval for reinforcement and set a timer to remind us to provide the reinforcer as long as the target misbehavior has not been observed. If the misbehavior is observed, the timer is reset. When providing reinforcement, we specifically tell the child what they did that was good and provide any additional reinforcers. For misbehavior that occurs very frequently, the amount of time we expect your child to behave before providing reinforcement will be very short. Over time we can increase the time your child can wait without misbehavior before receiving the reinforcer.

