

# Porchlight

Autism Education Series

## Reinforcement

### Introduction

Reinforcement is immediately and consistently delivering a consequence after a certain type of behavior has occurred that increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur again.

There are two types of reinforcement – negative and positive reinforcement. **Negative reinforcement** is removing something undesirable after a certain behavior has occurred. An example of this is when you are outside and it begins to rain. You open an umbrella to avoid getting wet. The umbrella helps you stay dry and acts as a negative reinforcer.

**Positive reinforcement** involves getting something desirable immediately after displaying a behavior. Today we will focus specifically on positive reinforcement and how to use it on a daily basis.

Positive reinforcement works for children and adults alike. For example, we go to work and we get paid. Getting paid acts as positive reinforcement and drives the behavior of us going to work. If we didn't get paid, it is unlikely that we would continue to go to work over the long term.

Children are also strongly driven to behave in ways that gets them things they want. Therefore, if you would like to have them learn new behaviors, or if you would like to strengthen existing behaviors, you can use positive reinforcement to do this.

Different reinforcers motivate different people. Some types of reinforcers are:

**Social Reinforcement** such as praise, hugs, kisses and 'thank you' are a personal and positive way of giving attention to a person. By being specific about why you are reinforcing certain behavior, you can increase the likelihood that it will happen again.

**Tangible Reinforcement** uses desired objects for reinforcement. These can include anything that a child likes such as stickers, candy, stars, stamps, raisins, time on an iPad, toys or any other item that the child likes to collect.

To use tangible reinforcement effectively, pick a behavior that you would like to use tangible items to reinforce. Choose an appropriate item. Think about when you will use the item – is it after your child has been doing something for a particular amount of time or is for the number of time she or he does something. Let your child know that they can expect the item for a certain behavior.

Present them with an opportunity to earn the item. They may need your guidance to perform the behavior in the beginning. Give them the item immediately after they demonstrate the behavior and give verbal feedback as well.

### Other Reinforcers

Other reinforcers include **sensory reinforcers**, such as something that the child likes to smell, hear or see. Examples of sensory reinforcers include smelling a flower or a scented marker, playing a song they like to listen to, or watching a cartoon they enjoy. You can also use an activity as a reinforcer, such as a trip to the park or playing a favorite game for a few minutes.

### Tips for Successful Reinforcement

Different children will react differently to reinforcers. To use reinforcement effectively, you need to be sure of the following:

What may be reinforcement for one child may not work for another child. Kim may like hugs, but Jack may dislike hugs and prefer to get a piggy back ride when he behaves in a desired way.

Break down tasks into smaller steps, and reinforce the smaller steps. If you ask a 5 year old child to brush their teeth, dress themselves and sit down for breakfast before you reinforce them, it is unlikely that they will be able to do all of this without help. Instead, you could reinforce them for putting toothpaste on their toothbrush and then again for brushing their teeth on their own. That way, they feel successful and are more inclined to demonstrate those behaviors.

### Reinforce IMMEDIATELY and CONSISTENTLY.

This means that you need to reinforce the behavior as soon as it occurs and do it each time the behavior is demonstrated, at least initially. Once a behavior is established, you can increase the number of times the child needs to demonstrate the behavior to get the item or reward.

To prevent boredom with reinforcers, you can create a choice board with visuals of a child's favorite reinforcers and allow the child to pick which one they would like to earn.

### Conclusion

Your child's BCBA can help you create an action plan for using reinforcement in your home that is specific to your child. Remember, consistency is the key to having your child respond well to positive reinforcement.