



**FLORIDA
ATLANTIC
UNIVERSITY**

Contact Information

Website:

www.coe.fau.edu/card/

Boca Raton Campus

777 Glades Road

Boca Raton, FL. 33431

Main Line: 561/ 297-2023

Toll Free: 1-888-632-6395

Fax: 561/297-2507

Port St Lucie Campus

500 NW California Blvd.

Port St Lucie, FL. 34986

Main Line: 561/ 297-2023

Toll Free: 1-888-632-6395

Fax: 772/ 873-3369



**CENTER FOR AUTISM
AND RELATED
DISABILITIES**



FACT SHEET - REINFORCEMENT

Positive Reinforcement

Because many children with autism have difficulty with communication, play skills, and socialization, it is often difficult to motivate them to engage in activities that incorporate these skills. Positive reinforcement can provide additional motivation to help shape and increase developmentally appropriate behaviors.

A positive reinforcer is anything that is added following a behavior that increases the likelihood of the behavior occurring again in the future. Rewards are often given to children when they engage in desirable behaviors, but if the reward does not cause those behaviors to increase in the future, then the reward is not actually a positive reinforcer.

Various Forms of Reinforcement

Natural Reinforcement: A child’s positive behaviors and social interactions are reinforced naturally. The natural consequences of positive behaviors become reinforcing themselves. Successful interactions become motivating to the child.

Examples:

- ◆ There is a ball out of reach for a child. The child says, “Ball,” and an adult hands the ball to the child. Access to the ball is reinforcing and increases the likelihood of the child requesting “ball” in the future.
- ◆ A child is struggling with a difficult puzzle. The child says, “Help,” and an adult helps the child. Completion of the puzzle is reinforcing. This successful interaction increases the likelihood of the child attempting puzzles in the future and requesting help when needed.

Social Reinforcement: A child’s behaviors are reinforced by positive social interactions. Social reinforcement can include smiles, tickles, high fives, and praise.

Examples:

- ◆ A child hesitantly raises his hand in class to answer a question. The teacher’s praise for his efforts or a peers wink from across the room are forms of social reinforcement. The positive social interactions offer the child a source of confidence in raising his hand in the future.
- ◆ A child stands close to his mother while walking through a busy area. The mother pats her son on the back or offers a hug for his positive behavior.

Activity Based Reinforcement: Access to fun activities can serve as reinforcers for a child’s behavior.

Examples:

- ◆ A child finishes all of his chores. Activity based reinforcement could include access to a computer game for 20 minutes.
- ◆ A parent who requires a child to wash his hands before sitting down to a favorite snack is using activity based reinforcement.

Tangible Reinforcement: A child’s positive behavior is reinforced by access to desired items that may not be related to the specific behavior.

Examples:

- ◆ A child who labels a color correctly is given a piece of a cookie.
- ◆ A child who sits nicely at the doctor’s office is given a lollipop.

Effective Reinforcement

When done effectively, positive reinforcement can be a very powerful tool in increasing behaviors.

Important components of all forms of reinforcement:

- 1.) **Immediacy** – reinforcement should be given as soon after the target behavior as possible.
- 2.) **Contingency** – a child should only receive a reinforcer when the target behaviors occur.
- 3.) **Variability** – to ensure a child doesn't get satiated or bored of a specific reinforcer, use a variety of preferred items.
- 4.) **Uniqueness to the child** – there is no one reinforcer that works for everyone. Every child is different, as are his or her preferences and effective reinforcers.

How to Identify Reinforcers

Since reinforcement should be unique to the child, direct observation is the most effective way to identify potential reinforcers. What kinds of activities does the child often do? When given a choice between activities what will the child choose? When left alone what will the child play with? How does the child respond to social praise?

When selecting a potential reinforcer, it is important to first consider things that are age appropriate and natural to the situation. **The best reinforcers are the least artificial activities or items** that will still work to increase the behavior. For example, if jumping on the trampoline and drawing pictures are both reinforcing for a child, drawing pictures may be a more appropriate reinforcer for completing hand-writing homework.

Once a potential reinforcer is identified, it may be necessary to make that item or activity unavailable, except for when the child exhibits the target behavior. This will make the reinforcer more valuable and more motivating to work for.

When giving a child a reinforcer, only allow limited access to an activity or small amounts of a food. A few minutes with a favorite toy or a small bite of a favorite snack will ensure that the child does not become bored with the item or activity and will be ready to earn it again with more work. Be aware that a child's preference may change often, and selection of reinforcers should change accordingly.

Remember: something is only a reinforcer if it increases the behavior it follows!

Fading Reinforcement

Ultimately, we want children to respond without the addition of artificial reinforcers. Once a child is responding reliably, it is important to thin the use of artificial motivators and establish more naturally occurring consequences as reinforcers. Naturally occurring consequences may include things that children would easily access in their environment on their own when they exhibit desirable behaviors. An example of naturally occurring consequences a child may access for a behavior, such as saying hi to a peer, may be praise from adults or attention from peers.

Some Reinforcement Cautions

- Reinforcement should be planned and not introduced as a bribe when a child refuses to do something.
- Positive reinforcers should not be offered to a child to entice them to stop engaging in challenging behaviors.
- Reinforcers given to a child should be large enough to increase behavior but as small as practical. For example, if a child works for praise and a pat on the back, then it is not necessary to use cookies.
- Do not promise or offer reinforcers that you cannot or do not intend to deliver.

Suggested Readings

Leaf, R., & McEachin, J. (1999). *A Work In Progress*. New York, New York: DRL Books

Scott, J., Clark, C., & Brady, M.P., (2000). *Students with Autism: Characteristics and Instructional Programming for Special Educators*. Singular Publishing Group

Becker, W.C. (1971). *Parents are teachers: A child management program*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

www.autismnetwork.org