



Reinforcement



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It seems pretty simple, doesn't it? You give a child a reward for something you want them to do (good behavior, performing an activity or task, etc.). Well, it is a little more complicated than that. Reinforcement and Rewards are not the same. Let's look at characteristics of each:

CHARACTERISTICS OF REINFORCERS:

- Specific and made for the individual, may not be something desired by others but is by the child
- Delivered or naturally occurring AFTER a behavior is demonstrated, usually on a predetermined schedule
- Can be an event, tangible, edible, or natural outcome of a behavior
- True reinforcer isn't determined until you see the effect it has on the behavior



CHARACTERISTICS OF REWARDS

- Often something teacher or adults assume would be reinforcing and is chosen by the adult
- May not strengthen behavior
- Given anytime, not just after a behavior occurs
- Often are the same for all the learner in the same environment



Basically, reinforcement is individualized to the learners needs and strengthens the wanted behavior. With rewards it's like playing the lottery, you might see behavior and change or you might not.

Examples of a reward:

A toy or activity (such as sticker rewards, noisemaker toys, or play-dough), that an adult assumes all children enjoy is given to a child. However, for the child with autism, it might not be reinforcing or may even feel like the opposite to that child and seem like a punishment.

Giving a child a piece of candy and saying, "I will give you this candy now please be good while we are in the store." It may or may not affect the child's behavior

Here are a couple of important things to remember when using reinforcement:

First, reinforcers chosen must be reinforcing to the child. Not all children respond to the same thing. Be sure whatever you are using is really liked by the specific child. Also remember that children will get tired of the same reinforcer over and over. Have several reinforcers ready. Try to not let the child have the reinforcer(s) you have chosen at other times (just for fun). When the child doesn't have free access to the reinforcer, it will be much more powerful to increase desired behavior when it is used. If the child is able to make choices, offering a choice board of chosen reinforcers can be very powerful too.

The second thing to remember is that the child must understand that their behavior (skill performed, task completion, whatever) is what earned the reinforcer. If you wait too long to give the reinforcer or if you give the reinforcer for other tasks or behaviors, the child might not understand that a specific behavior earns them a specific reinforcer.

Third, it is important to remember reinforcing a negative behavior will only increase that unwanted behavior. For example, if you are at a family gathering and a child is throwing himself to the ground and yelling, removing the child from the gathering (leaving) may reinforce the likelihood he will try it again next time in order to leave. Instead, reinforce when he is calm or initially lets you know he is wanting to leave by taking short breaks (go outside or to a quiet area) and return to the setting. You could provide additional reinforcement for time spent in the setting without a meltdown.

Reinforcement is an evidenced-based practice, while use of rewards and punishment are not.

Additional Resources



Autism Focused Intervention
Resources & Modules



U.S. Office of Special
Education Programs



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