

Reinforcement

Do you have a hard time getting your child to do what you ask? Are you seeing an increase in challenging behaviour? Are you having trouble teaching your child a new skill? While reinforcement or rewards might be the farthest idea in your mind, they can be very successful in changing behaviour!

What is reinforcement?

Reinforcement is anything that increases behaviour. For example, if you praise your child for making their bed and they make their bed more often, you have just reinforced a new behaviour!

Unwanted behaviour can be reinforced in the same way. For example, if your child refuses to eat a healthy dinner and demands a cookie and you give them the cookie, your child will learn they don't need to eat dinner because they can eat cookies! You have just reinforced an unwanted behaviour.



Isn't that bribing?

Bribing happens when a parent offers a reward to stop a behaviour when it is already happening. Think about the child who has a tantrum in the aisle of a store to try and get a toy. When the parent buys the toy **before** the tantrum has stopped, this is bribing and reinforcing unwanted behaviour.

Successful reinforcement happens when the parent explains the specific behaviour they want to see from the child before entering the store, as well as what the reward will be if the child is co-operative. If the child shows the parent the specific behaviour and does not have a tantrum during the trip, the reward is given **after** leaving the store. This is reinforcing the wanted behaviour.

What can reinforcement look like?



- **Verbal Praise** - "Wow, nice job cleaning up your toys!"
- **Body Language** - thumbs up, smiles, high-5.
- **Giving Access** - favourite toy or activity, a special privilege.
- **Reward System** - tokens, sticker charts, coins, money, tickets.
- **Free pass** - getting out of doing a difficult task, or a specific chore, or homework.
- **Overhear** - Telling another person about how proud you are of your child's behaviour while they are listening.

The reinforcement trap

Did you know that reinforcement can increase any behaviour, including behaviours that are unwanted? You can reinforce an unwanted behaviour by giving in to your child's demands, giving extra attention or by letting them avoid doing tasks.

You tell your child to pick up their toys. They ignore you, so you put the toys away by yourself.

or

You tell your child to turn off the video game. They continue to play, so you tell them they have 10 more minutes.

CAUTION

These responses increase the chances of your child ignoring your next request.



Your child demands to play on your phone. You tell them not right now, but they begin to scream. You give them the phone to stop the screaming.

or

Your child screams at the store to get a treat after you have already told them no, but you buy them the treat to keep them quiet.

CAUTION

These responses increase the chances of your child screaming for a treat or the phone in the future.

How do you chose the best reinforcement?

- Ask them! Children know what they like and may tell you what they want to work for!
- What does your child play with? Children's interests can change so be a detective. Watch and listen closely to your child for new ideas of what they might like.
- Is there a privilege that your child enjoys, such as completing a special activity or spending one-on-one time with you or another caregiver?
- Choose something that is not available all the time. For example, if you use a popsicle to reinforce a successful trip to the washroom, the popsicle should not be available at any other time as it will lose its reinforcing value for toileting.
- Create a surprise! Many children love the idea of a surprise. It can be both motivating and exciting.

How to give reinforcement

When using reinforcement, there are simple guidelines to follow to ensure it will be effective.

Be Specific

Label exactly what your child has done well. Avoid making general statements, such as “good job.” Instead, say “you picked up the blocks, great job!”

Immediate

Don't wait! Catch the good behaviour as soon as it happens. Don't be afraid to interrupt your child. Reinforcement should be given often and in a variety of settings and situations.

Frequent

The more you reinforce a behaviour, the more likely it will happen again. Reinforce often when teaching a new or difficult skill. Your child might need more reinforcement and encouragement at the beginning.

Enthusiastic and genuine

Your verbal praise should sound like you really believe in what you are saying. If a child hears hesitation in your voice or your facial expression does not match your tone, they might not believe it.

Child preference

Think about how your child likes to be recognized for a job well done. Some children enjoy a gentle touch while others like a bear hug. Some children like loud and excited praise while others may prefer something more quiet such as a wink or thumbs up.

Based on effort, not success

Validate **all** your child's efforts, especially when the task is hard. Providing reinforcement during your child's effort will help motivate them to keep going. Avoid the “but” statements. Keep it positive and try not to highlight what they can do better.

Connect the reward with the behaviour

Token board

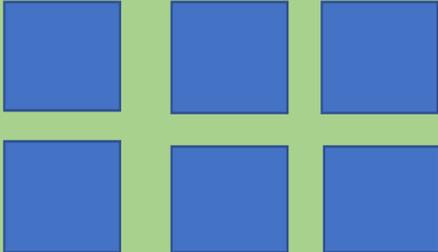
This is one tool that rewards wanted behaviour with “tokens” that they can exchange for something they value.

Here are some simple steps to get you started:

- Pick the behaviour you want to increase (proper tooth brushing, putting clothes away, cleaning up toys, etc.).
- Decide how many tokens they need to earn their prize (hint: when they are first starting, it should be really easy for them to earn the prize).
- Decide what tokens to use, where the tokens will be kept.
- Decide what rewards they can trade in their tokens for. The reward should be chosen by the child and visually represented.
- Get started. Give the token as soon as the behaviour happens. Be consistent and give verbal praise as well.
- When the token board is full, give the reward immediately.
- Review and change when needed. You can increase the amount of tokens needed to earn the reward after they have caught on.
- Avoid removing tokens when once they are earned.

My Token Board

When I follow the rules I get tokens.



When I get ALL my tokens I get to choose a prize from the treasure box!



Remember.....

- **Praise and reward** often, especially when it is a new behaviour. Be **specific**.
- Children have **off** days, just like adults. Sick, tired and stressed can affect behaviour.
- Think about what your child likes, not what you **think** they might like.
- Use **First-Then** statements and reward systems like **token boards**.

Resources and information have been taken from the following sources:

www.psychologytoday.com

www.understood.org

www.connectability.ca



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