



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 occurs immediately after a behaviour that increases the likelihood of the behaviour occurring again in the future. For example, if you praise your child for making their bed and they make their bed more often, you have just reinforced that behaviour! (Kearney, 2015).

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 (How to ABA, 2016; Kerry's Place Autism Services, N.d).

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 (How to ABA, 2016; Kerry's Place Autism Services, N.d).



## What can reinforcement look like?

- **Verbal Praise.** E.g., “Wow, nice job cleaning up your toys!”
- **Body Language.** E.g., thumbs up, smiles, high-5.
- **Giving Access.** E.g., favourite toy or activity, a special privilege.
- **Reward System.** E.g., tokens, sticker charts, coins, money, tickets.
- **Free pass.** E.g., getting out of doing a difficult task, or a specific chore, or homework.
- **Overhear.** E.g., Telling another person about how proud you are of your child’s behaviour while they are listening. (Kearney, 2015)



### 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.
- Reinforcement can increase both good and unwanted behaviour. (Kerry’s Place Autism Services, N.d.)

## 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!” (Cooper et al., 2007)

**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 (Cooper et al., 2007).

**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 (Cooper et al., 2007).

**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 (Cooper et al., 2007).

**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 quieter such as a wink or thumbs up (Kearney, 2015).

**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 (Kearney, 2015).

## The reinforcement trap

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. Here are some examples of how you may be reinforcing unwanted behaviours:



- You tell your child to pick up their toys. They ignore you, so you put the toys away by yourself.
- You tell your child to turn off the video game. They continue to play, so you tell them they have 10 more minutes.
- 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.
- 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.

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

## How do you choose 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 and save it just to reward a specific behaviour (e.g., a popsicle just for successful washroom trips)
- Create a surprise! Many children love the idea of a surprise. It can be both motivating and exciting. (Lill et al., 2021)



## Additional Resources

Connectability – general resources: <https://connectability.ca/category/kids/>

Connectability – Reinforcement: <https://connectability.ca/2010/09/23/reinforcement/>

Geneva Centre for Autism – visuals: <https://www.autism.net/resources/visual-gallery>

Kerry's Place – Autism Resources: [Learn About Autism: Videos & Guides | Kerry's Place \(kerrysplace.org\)](#)

The National Clearing House on Autism Evidence and Practice - Evidence data base on Reinforcement: [https://ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/ebp-database?f%5B0%5D=field\\_tax\\_intervention%3A68](https://ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/ebp-database?f%5B0%5D=field_tax_intervention%3A68)

**Note:** Though these resources focus on Autism, there are many useful resources for all children.

## References

Cooper, J.O., Heron, T.E., Heward, W.L. (2007). *Applied Behaviour Analysis, second edition*. Pearson Prentice Hall.

How to ABA. (2016). *Reinforcement & Bribery: Is There A Difference?* <https://howtoaba.com/reinforcement-bribery/>

Kearney, A.J. (2015). *Understanding Applied Behaviour Analysis: An introduction to ABA for parents, teachers, and other professionals*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Kerry's Place Autism Services. N.d. *Reinforcement Versus Bribery*.

[https://www.kerrysplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/001\\_reinforcement-vs.-bribery.pdf](https://www.kerrysplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/001_reinforcement-vs.-bribery.pdf)

Kerry's Place Autism Services. n.d. *The Simple and Powerful First-Then Strategy*.

[https://www.kerrysplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/6\\_9754\\_kerrys\\_dwnld\\_05.pdf](https://www.kerrysplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/6_9754_kerrys_dwnld_05.pdf)

Lill, J.D., Shriver, M.D., Allen, K.D. (2021). Stimulus Preference Assessment Decision-Making System (SPADS): A Decision-Making Model for Practitioners. *Behaviour analysis in practice*, 14(4), 1144-1156.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-020-00539-3>

## Information

If you need more information, visit [www.durham.ca/CDBS](http://www.durham.ca/CDBS)

## Disclaimer

Resources shared by Children's Developmental and Behavioural Supports (CDBS) – Durham Region is offered for informational and educational purposes only. This information should not be constituted as individualized advice, and does not imply that Durham Region recommends, condones, or supports the implementation of this information. CDBS does not assume any responsibility or risk for your use of the material in this resource. Always speak to a qualified health service provider if you have concerns about your child's development, treatment and/or medical condition.

If you require this information in an accessible format, please contact 1-800-372-1102 ext. 2829