

Positive Reinforcement for Appropriate Behavior

Positive reinforcement is a procedure whereby a student, contingent upon performing a specific behavior, is immediately rewarded to maintain or increase that behavior. Utilizing positive reinforcement does not mean bribing students. Instead, positive reinforcement increases the chances that a student will do something appropriate that will benefit them in the future. We are suggesting that you use procedures that encourage, support, and empower students to achieve positive outcomes in school and the community.

Things to do:

- **Select and define a behavior to increase.**

1. Always specify the behavior to be increased before initiating a behavior change for a student. Use *descriptive* rather than *vague* or *ambiguous* terms. For instance: Vague- "Peter will behave when standing in line." Vs. Observable and Measurable- "Peter will keep his hands and feet to himself while standing in line for the bus."
2. After selecting the behavior(s), instructors must define the behaviors in ways that you can see and measure. For example, "Karla should show more respect" fails to identify when and under the conditions the behavior will occur. Instead, "When the instructor gives a direction, Karla will comply within 4-5 seconds" is a behavior that you can see and count.

- **Choose reinforcers.**

1. Natural Reinforcers- free time with a friend, erasing the whiteboard, playing a game, sitting next to a friend, handing out calculators or number lines, sitting in tutor's chair, do only half the math assignment, play with them at recess, get a drink whenever you want to, etc.
2. Material Reinforcers- Stickers, pencils, erasers, or chance to pick a prize from class treasure box.
3. Generalized Reinforcers- Tokens, poker chips, points, tickets.
4. Social Reinforcers- a smile, wink, a nice compliment, a high-five, effective praise, proximity.

- **Deliver positive reinforcement.**

When giving praise, use the I-FEED-V rule. This means giving praise the student "immediately" after the target behavior occurs, "frequently," and "enthusiastically"—especially when working on a new behavior. Also, be sure to use "eye contact" and specifically "describe the target behavior." Finally, use a "variety of praise statements."

When teaching new skills or behaviors, make sure the student understands what behavior is required to earn the reward. Then, *each time* he/she performs the

behavior, *immediately* reinforce him. Timing is everything. The *shorter* the delay between the behavior and reinforcer, the greater the chance the behavior will be strengthened and increased. In contrast, the *longer* the delay between the behavior and reinforcer, the greater the risk that another behavior will be inadvertently reinforced.

- **Monitor student performance.**

The only way to know if a reinforcer is working is to observe the student's behavior over time to determine if it is increasing. By collecting data on the student's performance, instructors can easily evaluate the value of the reinforcers and make adjustments as needed.

1. Check Target Behaviors- If desired behaviors fail to increase, check the target behaviors. Are they well defined, and do students understand them?
2. Check Reinforcers- Also, check the reinforcers. Are there too many? Too few? Are they valued?

Potential Problems and Solutions:

If the desired behavior failed to increase, there was not positive reinforcement. There are several strategies for selecting reinforcement. These include:

- Watching the student to determine what she likes to do or what activities the student engages in during free time, leisure time, etc.
- Asking the student what he would like to earn on a reinforcer checklist (a list of potential reinforcers).
- Allowing students access to potential reinforcers by displaying items for a brief period during the tutoring session.
- Building a reinforcer menu that consists of items frequently selected by students.