



FACT SHEET NUMBER 34

projectaccess.missouristate.edu
 projectaccess@missouristate.edu
 866-481-3841



REINFORCEMENT

Reinforcement is included as one of the effective interventions listed in the Missouri Autism Guidelines Initiative (MAGI). It seems pretty simple, doesn't it? You give a student a reward for something you want him to do (good behavior, performing an academic task, etc.). Well, it is a little more complicated than just that.

When we use the term positive reinforcement, we usually mean we give the student something good or something he wants. Technically, this is incorrect. In behavioral terms, positive reinforcement means anything that is added to the environment that makes it more likely the behavior you want will increase. For example, we would like Tina to stay in her seat for a certain amount of time. After she has remained seated for say, three minutes, we give her a piece of Skittles candy. We are hoping the consequence of receiving a Skittles will increase her in-seat behavior.

Now, when most people think about negative reinforcement, they usually really mean punishment. This is also incorrect. In behavioral terms, negative reinforcement means anything that is taken away from the environment that causes a behavior to increase. Here's one of our favorite examples. Eli has a melt-down when he is presented with a writing task. When this happens, his teacher has him go to time-out. We're pretty sure Eli is trying to avoid the writing task. So, taking away time in the classroom is actually making the behavior increase. Time-out helps him avoid the task. It is reinforcing.

It helps to think of reinforcement as add and subtract, rather than good or bad!

Sometimes, when we are wanting to decrease a problem behavior, we help a child with an alternative that meets the same reason the child is engaging in the behavior. Or, in other words that alternative behavior would help Eli avoid the writing task, but in a much more acceptable way. Eli could hold up a card indicating he needs a break. He is still avoiding the work, but he has asked in a more appropriate manner. We would reinforce this behavior heavily! This is called differential reinforcement of an alternate behavior or DRA. (And, don't worry. We'll come up with some solutions to help Eli tolerate writing tasks in the meantime.)

Other ways we use differential reinforcement might include:
 DRI-Differential reinforcement of an incompatible behavior
 DRO-Differential reinforcement of other behavior

Here are a couple of examples. Let's say Justin is picking at sores on his arm. We give him a cushion ball to hold instead. Since he cannot pick at his arm while holding the ball, we reinforce--differential reinforcement of an incompatible behavior or DRI. Maria is hitting other students. We'll address this in many ways, but one of our strategies is to reinforce any other behavior Maria engages in around her classmates. This is differential reinforcement of other behavior or DRO.

Another reinforcement strategy would include token reinforcement. This is simply giving a student a token to add up to a reinforcement she will receive later. For example, Darrin is asked to complete five math problems. He receives a token for each completed problem. After he receives five tokens, he is reinforced. Maybe he gets computer time or a cracker, whatever is reinforcing to him.

Example of a token reinforcement board:



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

First, reinforcers chosen must be reinforcing to the student. Not all students respond to the same thing. Be sure whatever you are using is really reinforcing to the specific child. Also remember that children will get tired of the same reinforcer over and over. This is called satiation. Have several reinforcers ready. Try not to let the child have the reinforcer(s) you

have chosen at other times. When the child is deprived of the reinforcer, it will be much more powerful when you use it.

The second thing to remember is that the child must understand that a certain behavior earns him the reinforcer. This is called contingency. If you wait too long to give the reinforcer or if you give the reinforcer for other tasks or behaviors, the student might not understand that a specific behavior earns him a specific reinforcer.

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