

# STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE BEHAVIORS: REINFORCEMENT



## WHAT IT IS:

Reinforcement is providing something (praise, rewards) after a child displays a desired behavior that makes the behavior more likely to happen again. Reinforcers come in many forms (for example, labeled praise, actively observing a child's actions, a hug, a sticker or stamp, special activity, a smile). Another use of Reinforcement is providing differential attention (intentionally ignoring mild undesired behavior, like whining, and directing attention back to the child when the negative behavior is no longer displayed).

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

- Sanaa walks into the classroom and sits on the carpet. The teacher says, "thank you for sitting quietly!"
- At the end of recess, the teacher gives high-fives to the children standing in line ready to go inside.
- Michael falls to the ground crying and yelling when center time ends. The teacher ignores his tantrum and continues cleaning up with the other children. When Michael stops yelling and crying and begins to clean-up, she immediately approaches him, smiles, and pats him on the back.



## WHY IT WORKS:

- Children are highly motivated by the attention of an adult. So when a teacher consistently gives attention, praise, or rewards to the behaviors he or she *wants* to see, it helps children learn which behaviors are valued by the teacher. Also, reinforcing one child's behavior helps *other* children learn and display positive behaviors (for example, praising one child for "sitting" draws attention to that positive behavior and encourages the other students to do the same.) It's particularly effective to use Labeled Praise to describe the desired behavior because it lets the child (and his or her peers) know *why* he or she is receiving the teacher's attention (for example, I like the way you are walking!). Reinforcement increases children's self-esteem by drawing attention to what they are doing *well*. This can be particularly important for children who display challenging behaviors because adults typically spend more time paying attention to their negative behaviors (telling them what **not** to do) than acknowledging the things they are doing well.

## WHEN IT MAY BE USED:

Reinforcement is a strategy that is effective across a wide array of behaviors and contexts and should be used frequently! Reinforcement can be used for any positive behaviors that you want to see more often. Differential attention is a great way to replace mild negative behaviors such as whining and complaining with appropriate behaviors such as persistence and independence. A more formal reinforcement system can be used for behaviors that are more difficult to change.

## WHAT ARE THE STEPS/TO-DO'S:

### Reinforcing Positive Behaviors

1. Choose the positive behaviors you want to see more often (target the positive behaviors that you want to see **instead** of the negative behaviors).
  2. Plan which reinforcers you will use (praise, high-five's, special roles, extra book readings, stickers).
  3. "Catch children being good"--be on the lookout for the behavior you **want** to see.
  4. When the child displays a positive behavior, **immediately** provide reinforcement.
    - ✓ When using Labeled Praise, make sure to specifically describe the desired behavior. For example, "Great job walking down the hall with your hands at your side!" rather than "Good job!".
    - ✓ Be mindful that you are **not** giving a "back-handed" compliment (i.e., drawing attention to the child's negative behavior). For example, "You did a great job cleaning up the crayons today. Why can't you do that all the time?" is a "back-handed" compliment.
    - ✓ Be sure to reinforce effort and progress, **not** the perfect display of behavior.
  5. Monitor the child(ren)'s response over time to see if the reinforcement is working.
    - ✓ Vary your reinforcement method to keep the child interested. Switching up your reinforcer can be as simple as changing from using a sticker to a stamp.
- ❖ Reinforcement works best if used consistently and often. For example, praising a child **once** for lining up may not make a big difference in behavior over time, but giving high-fives to children **every** day when they line up will!
  - ❖ It is important that children experience 5 positive reinforcements for every 1 correction, redirection, discipline, or negative interaction. Be mindful of this ratio as you are looking for positive behaviors, especially for those children who show more challenging behaviors compared to other children (and consequently receive more redirection). You may want to try to track the amount of reinforcement and corrections a child receives if you think his or her ratio is off balance.

### Differential Attention

1. Choose the mild negative behaviors you want to reduce.
  2. Anticipate when the child may display the negative behavior you are targeting.
  3. When the child displays this behavior, do not show any attention to him or her (turn your back, walk away, attend to another child).
  4. Reinforce the child as soon as he or she displays a neutral or positive behavior.
- ❖ Be prepared for a short-term increase in the negative behavior. If a child is used to you attending to his or her negative behavior you are likely to see what is called an "extinction burst"—he or she will display more of the negative behavior briefly before stopping the behavior. If you are consistent in your use of differential attention the child will stop the negative behavior quickly.

### Reinforcement System

- ✓ For information and resources for how to implement formal reinforcement systems:  
<http://www.lookconsultation.org/resources/Reinforcement-Resource1.pdf>