

SUCCESS



OVER

STRESS

Reinforcement Part 1: Understanding Reinforcement and How it is Important for Teaching

The outcome of teaching is that a student learns a skill. In other words, that the student is able to do something or respond to something because of the teaching that occurred. What a person does is called *behavior*. If what a student does is behavior, and teachers need to get students to do new things (*behave*), then it is important to know what behavior is and learn about the things that get behavior to happen.

As mentioned above, behavior is what a person does. This includes both “good” and “bad” behavior. Any time we refer to things that have an effect on behavior, it means it has that effect on any behavior.

When looking at behavior as something teachers change in some way, it is important to describe behavior in terms that are both:

1. **Observable:** define behavior in a way that makes it clear what staff would observe when the behavior happens and that the observation would allow agreement across staff on whether the behavior occurred or not. This observation can be something you will “see” the student do, something you “hear” the student say, etc.

Example	Non-Example
Student pays attention	Student keeps their eyes and body oriented toward teacher and teacher materials
Student gets frustrated with math worksheets	Student will swipe materials and slap the table when presented with math worksheets

2. **Measurable:** allows staff to measure the behavior in some way such as count how often it happens (frequency of behavior), count how long it happens (duration of the behavior), measure the intensity, etc.

Keep in mind, behavior does not happen in isolation. It always Teachers can do things before or after the student’s behavior. The things that happen before behavior are known as *antecedents* and those that happen after behavior are known as *consequences*. One important consequence is *reinforcement*.

What is reinforcement?

When a person does something (i.e., behaves) and things get better after doing it, then that behavior will happen more often in the future under similar circumstances. This is what we call *reinforcement*.

We all do things that result in things getting better for us. In schools, students will do the things that result in things getting better for them.

It is important to understand that reinforcement is not a thing, but rather the process by which, when things get better after a behavior, that behavior happens more often in the future. This means anything can serve as a reinforcer as long as things get better for the person behaving.

Because reinforcement works on any behavior, as a teacher, if you learn how to use reinforcement for behaviors you want to teach or see increase, then you will be able to achieve more success with your students.

Important reminders about reinforcement:

1. You reinforce the behavior of the student, not the student.
2. Reinforcement will affect any behavior, whether it is good or bad behavior.
3. Reinforcement occurs for everyone.
4. Reinforcement happens even if you do not plan or intend for it to happen. Therefore, if you learn to observe behaviors you want to see increase and purposefully use reinforcement following those behaviors, you should see your students engaging in those responses more often.

Two types of reinforcement:

1. Positive – anything that is **added** after a behavior that makes things better and results in the behavior happening more often in the future.
2. Negative – anything that is **taken away** after a behavior that makes things better and results in the behavior happening more often in the future.

How to deliver reinforcement for it to be most effective:

- Deliver it after the behavior you want to see increase
- Deliver it right away – the quicker it follows the behavior, the better
- Make sure that what you deliver is valuable at that moment. This is why it is important for teachers to understand what things affect the value of any item or activity.
 - For things we need for survival (unlearned motivation/reinforcers such as water, food, air, sleep, etc.), motivation changes based on principles of satiation and deprivation.
 - Satiation: when one has had enough or too much of something, it loses value.
 - Example: a student may “like” chips, but they may not be valuable right after lunch.
 - Deprivation: when one has not had enough or has not had it in a while, it becomes more valuable.
 - Example: similar to the example above, if a student

- “likes” chips, they will probably be more valuable right before lunch when the student has not eaten in a while.
- For other items and events that we have learned to value through our experience with them, become valuable because of a change in the environment.
 - Something changes or happens in the environment that makes something valuable.
 - Example: something sticky gets on your hands, which makes a sink, water, and soap valuable or needing to write something, makes a pen valuable
 - Something changes or happens in the environment that makes removing it valuable.
 - Example: hard work gets presented, which makes getting rid of the hard work valuable

How do we maintain the value of reinforcement?

- Vary type of reinforcers: the more different types of reinforcers, the better! Here is a list of some of the different kinds of reinforcers to consider:
 - Edibles
 - Drinks
 - Sensory toys: visual, acoustical, tactile
 - Physical interactions: motion, hugs, squeezes, rock, activities such as swing, ball play
 - Surprise: mystery motivator, what’s inside the bag? or sudden appearances
 - Activities: writing, drawing, coloring
 - Technology: iPad programs, videos, music, etc.
- Vary schedule: change when and how often you deliver reinforcement- we all value unpredictable or unexpected reinforcers
- Vary way it is delivered
- Limit how much is delivered at any one time: too much at once will lead to things losing value
- Stop before it loses value: keep them wanting more instead of delivering the reinforcer until it loses value.

Examples of varying reinforcers

Important tip:

Be part of the fun. When you deliver reinforcement and engage with the student so that you are part of the fun and make reinforcement even better in your presence, it leads to you becoming more valuable for the student. If you are valuable, students will be more likely to respond to you and enjoy learning. Everyone learns best when they are having fun!

Things that compete or affect the value of reinforcement:

- Effort: students will engage in responses that require less effort. If it is too hard...reinforcer may not be worth it!
- Rate: if reinforcement is not delivered often enough, it may not be worth it
- Magnitude: if the reinforcement is not enough (quantity, quality), it may not be worth it
- Immediacy: if it takes too long to get, it may not be worth it

Other tips to make reinforcement work best:

- Cheerfully, enthusiastically
- Without a hint of demand (at first!)
 - Initially, it may involve not looking at the student because for that student, eye contact has become associated with things getting worse.
- In sufficient amounts
 - Not too little, not too much, but “just right”
 - “Sufficient amount” (depends on difficulty of response)

Differential Reinforcement:

How much reinforcement or what you deliver as reinforcement will depend on the student's response. As a teacher, you have the ability to get the student to engage in their best behavior, if you deliver better reinforcement for better responses. We are all willing to work harder to get the better things!

Better reinforcement can mean:

- More quantity
- More time spent with reinforcer
- Better quality

Some examples of when to give better reinforcement

- Target responses (things you are teaching)
- More independent responses
- Cooperative responding
- Quick responses
- Responses for non-preferred tasks

[Differential Reinforcement Example](#)