

Positive Reinforcement: Fun and Easy Ways to Make It Happen at Home



By **Angela Nelson, MS, BCBA**
Executive Director of Family and
Clinical Services, Rethink

While the benefits of providing positive reinforcement to your child are quite well-known, the definition of positive reinforcement and how to make it happen at home aren't necessarily common sense. Wouldn't it be great to always know how to motivate your child, and better yet, how to weave reinforcement of those desirable behaviors into everyday life without even thinking about it?

Let's take a look into the world of positive reinforcement for a moment, and how we can find fun and easy ways to integrate it into our homes...

But first, before we get to the good stuff, let's talk about reinforcement- what is it exactly? It basically means a behavior is more likely to happen again in the future due to a presentation or removal of something in the environment.

Here's a breakdown of positive reinforcement: Your child does something -> you **give him** something or **something happens** immediately afterwards -> your child is more likely to do that action/behavior again. An example: Your child takes

out the trash, does the dishes, and cleans his room -> you take him for ice cream (the reinforcer) -> he helps with chores again.

Here's the breakdown of negative reinforcement (note- this term is often misused and it is not the same thing as punishment): Your child does something -> you **stop giving him** something or **something is removed** -> your child is more likely to do that action/behavior again. An example: Your child screams when you give him veggies -> you take the veggies away and let him play -> he screams the next time veggies are presented to him.

In other words, the word reinforcement equals an "increase" in behavior and then "positive" refers to introducing something to the environment while "negative" refers to taking something away. It's important to note that both concepts can lead to an increased likelihood of desired as well as undesired behaviors.

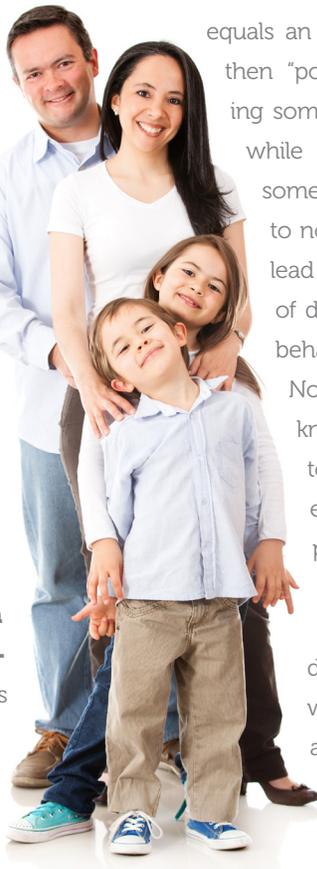
Now you may be surprised to know there are several ways to find a successful reinforcer. Some parents find simply asking their child can be enough (e.g., "John, what would you like to earn for doing this list of chores each week?"). Others branch out and ask other significant figures in the child's life such as a teacher, as



they may have great insight into reinforcers parents are not aware of. For children that might be more impacted by a learning or behavior challenge, doing a simple pre-task choice might be best (e.g., laying 2 items on the table and seeing which they grab or look at). Another common approach is just observing your child play. What stands out as a fun toy or game?

If you're having trouble or just need some fresh ideas, here are a couple fun examples you can personalize to your family that cost little or no money:

- **Spending one-on-one time** with a parent after a day of helping with chores
- **Placing a cotton balls in a jar** for each positive behavior to be cashed in later for a larger reinforcer
- **"Caught you being good" coupons**



for each day without a challenging behavior (e.g., coupons could be “mom does your chores for a day,” “you get to pick any cereal you want,” etc.)

- **Reduced chores for the week** for positive reports from school
- **Puzzle piece token board** (e.g., take a picture of a reinforcer or activity your child can earn such as a movie. Cut the picture into a set number of pieces. Each day without a tantrum earns your child a piece. After the puzzle is complete, he earns a movie night)

In addition to finding out what is motivating and might serve as an effective reinforcer, it's important to consider making a plan for how you will implement a reinforcement system. Here are 10 considerations that can help boost the efficacy of that plan:

1. **The immediacy of positive reinforcement matters-** the reinforcer loses power if given too far in the future and you run the risk of inadvertently reinforcing another (less desirable) behavior
2. **The type of reinforcer matters-** you'll want to know if your child is more motivated by edibles, tangibles, activity, social, etc. (e.g., taking a child to a baseball game when they have no interest won't serve as an effective reinforcer)
3. **Set your child up for success-** if your child has been getting into fights every day at school, it's best to start with 1 or 2 days without a fight to earn a reinforcer as opposed to a whole week
4. **Match the reinforcer to the task difficulty-** reserve those big-ticket items for several consecutive weeks of positive behavior and conversely, make the reinforcer powerful enough to actually reinforce the behavior you want to see continue/increase (a piece of gum for a whole day of chores probably won't cut it)
5. **Make it exclusive-** if your child has free access to stickers, they won't serve as a power reinforcer. Consider reserving certain games, toys, treats, etc. for your reinforcement plan only (maybe hide or lock those goodies up!)
6. **Avoid satiation-** similar to above, too much of something won't be reinforcing for too long. Don't give 20 jelly beans when your child complies with a simple instruction because it won't be long before he doesn't want them anymore
7. **Use behavior-specific praise-** giving more pointed feedback about your child's behavior makes it clearer as to what is being reinforced (e.g., “Great job looking at me when I called your name!”)
8. **Use the Premack Principle-** it's simple: First...Then. Pair a non-preferred activity with a preferred activity so they can be motivated and look forward to something (e.g., “First homework, then video games”)
9. **Begin with a “thick schedule of reinforcement”-** provide more reinforcement at the beginning to establish the behavior (e.g., a token for every time he follows directions)
10. **Fade reinforcement over time-** thin the schedule of reinforcement so you're eventually going to give a token after (for example) every 2, then 5, then 10 directions he followed, until you've faded to more naturally occurring reinforcement, such as praise, high fives, an occasional trip to the store for a treat, etc.

Positive reinforcement is one of the most powerful and widely used principles in learning and we know that it leads to more positive results than punishment alone. One reason is because reinforcing the appropriate behavior teaches our children what **to do**, not just what **not to do**. Getting into the mindset of reinforcing appropriate behaviors and the absence or lower rates of challenging behaviors can really set you up to be an effective teacher. It may take some time to proactively make a plan or change the way you react to certain behaviors but it may be well worth it. But, don't take my word for it- try it out!

And as always, if you need any help or have questions, Rethink is here for you. Schedule your free tele-consultations today at <http://rethinkbenefits.com> today!

References:

Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2007). *Applied behavior analysis*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill-Prentice Hall.