



Reinforcing Children's Behavior

Whether teaching academic, behavioral, or language skills reinforcing skills is critical for helping children improve. The basic steps of behavior modification include identifying the behavior, setting expectations, monitoring progress, and reinforcing correct behaviors. Below are important behavior management concepts for reinforcing correct behaviors.

1. Be Clear About Expectations: Let children know the exact behavior you would like them to show and the consequences for the behavior. For example, telling a child, "Behave when we are at the store," is vague. A better way to describe the behavior is, "Keep your hands to yourself when we are at the store. I will tell you when you can take things from the shelves." Focus on one aspect of a broad area so children know exactly what they are expected to do. Remind children of the behavior before they go to the store and while at the store. Observing behaviors and determining which ones to modify are important steps for knowing what to reinforce. Often situations can be stressful and parents and professionals need to identify behaviors clearly to determine which behaviors to change or what is causing the problem.

2. Be Consistent: After selecting specific behaviors to reinforce, be sure to focus on and reinforce those behaviors. Be sure to carry expectations forward from one day or activity to the next and continue to support appropriate behaviors in different settings.

3. Reinforce Small Steps: When children show even small improvements, be sure to reinforce them. Some children respond well to verbal praise. When praising a child, state what they did correctly. For example, "I like how you touched only the groceries I asked you to pick out." Be sure to reinforce these behaviors immediately. If you walked down the first aisle without the child touching something, say, "Great job! You remembered to keep your hands to yourself and touch only the things I ask you to get."

4. Set Realistic Expectations: After observing a behavior, create expectations children can meet so they know they can succeed. For example, if a child has difficulty remaining in their seat through dinner; document how long they can stay in their seat. Set an egg timer for the length of time they currently can stay in their seat. Reinforce them for staying in their seat and gradually increase the time on the timer. If a child is working on a skill such as making the bed, reinforce them for pulling up the sheets then gradually increase their role to include putting the cover on, putting the pillows back, etc.

5. Involve Children in Reinforcement: When reinforcing a behavior with a reward, give children a few choices for the reward. By offering a few choices for reinforcement, children get the opportunity to work towards something they enjoy. For example, have pictures of three activities the child enjoys: a computer, a swing, and a CD player. Let them pick their own activity rather than assuming you know what they would like to do. If children are working towards a larger goal, involve them in marking their progress. For example, if a child has to make their bed each day to earn a toy for the week, have a behavior chart and let the child put a sticker or mark on the days they made their bed.

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