



# Positive Reinforcement



## Definition

Positive reinforcement is a procedure whereby a student, contingent upon performing a specific behavior, is immediately rewarded to maintain or increase that behavior.

## Nondefinition

Are we suggesting that you bribe students? No! Most of the time when we hear the word “bribery,” we think of people being bought off to do something illegal, corrupt, or unethical. Instead, positive reinforcement increases the chances that a student will do something appropriate that will benefit him in the future. We are suggesting that you use procedures that encourage, support, and empower students to achieve positive outcomes in school and in the community.



## Things to Do

- ✓ Select and define a behavior to increase.
- ✓ Choose reinforcers.
- ✓ Deliver positive reinforcement.
- ✓ Monitor student performance.

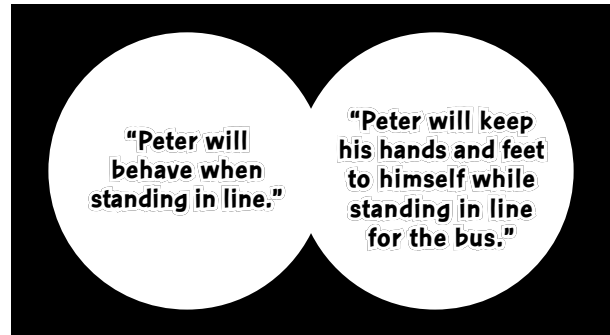
## ✓ Select and define a behavior to increase.

### Select the Behavior

Always specify the behavior to be increased before initiating a behavior change or academic program for a student. Use **descriptive** rather than **vague** or **ambiguous** terms. For instance:

VAGUE

OBSERVABLE &  
MEASURABLE

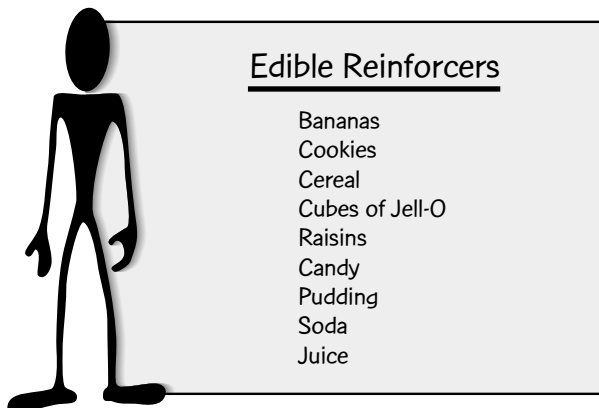


### Define the Behavior

After selecting the behavior(s), instructors must define the behaviors in "observable and measurable" terms. In other words, student behavior that you can see and measure. For example, "Karla should show more respect" fails to identify when and under what conditions the behavior will occur. Instead, "When the instructor gives a direction, Karla will comply within 4-5 seconds" is a behavior that you can see and count.

## ✓ Choose reinforcers.

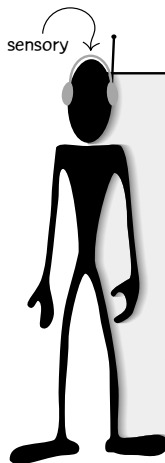
Choose reinforcers that appeal to students. There are a wide variety from which to select.



**WATCH OUT!!!** Not everyone likes the same thing. It's important to individualize the reinforcers. One way is to provide students a menu of edibles. These are items that students like best and instructors can easily make available. Periodically rotate in different foods to maintain student interest.

## Menu

- Remember, start by using the most nutritious food.
- Use caution with younger children who may choke on smaller foods, such as raisins or grapes.
- Also, be sure to check with parents regarding students' food allergies or other medical problems, such as diabetes.
- Overall, edible reinforcers are highly effective for students who initially require immediate reinforcement in smaller amounts. However, to avoid dependence on edible reinforcers, pair or simultaneously use the reinforcer with a praise statement. Through pairing, the student gradually becomes motivated by praise alone.



### Sensory Reinforcers

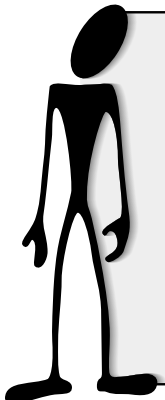
- |                              |                               |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Listen to music on a Walkman | Choose a poster               |
| View a kaleidoscope          | Smell soaps                   |
| Sit in a rocking chair       | Play a CD in a boom box       |
| Select a perfume             | Blow party noisemakers        |
| Pet a stuffed animal         | Rub on a hand lotion          |
| Use a back scratcher         | Collect glow-in-the-dark bugs |
| Burn incense                 | Use a vibrator                |
| Toss balloons                | See cartoons on a viewfinder  |
| Blow bubbles                 |                               |

These are things you can hear, see, smell, or touch.

Like all reinforcers, these are most effective when they are appropriate for the student's **age**, **interest**, and **ability** level.



Natural Activities  
and Privileges



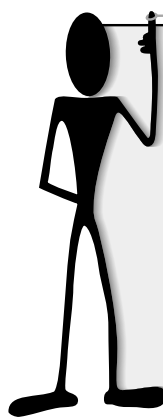
### Natural Reinforcers

- |                                      |                             |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Playing a game                       | Erasing the blackboard      |
| Watching a movie                     | Being a team captain        |
| Reading a comic book                 | Putting up a bulletin board |
| Free time with a friend              | Operating equipment         |
| Shooting baskets                     | Being an office assistant   |
| Access to school vending<br>Machines | Staying up late             |
| Handing out calculators              | Sitting next to a friend    |

An easy way to identify natural reinforcers is to **watch** what students enjoy doing during free time. Or better yet, watch carefully and keep track of what they most often **ask** to do. Natural reinforcers are also **privileges**—everyday things we often take for granted.

Remember, the reinforcement should **match the effort** required to earn it.

Material Reinforcer  
(yo-yo)




### Material Reinforcers

Stickers	CDs
Pencils	Plastic ants
Bookmarks	Wax teeth
Erasers	Hand buzzer
Trading cards	Disappearing ink
Movie tickets	Magic tricks
Food coupons	Masks
Clay	Trick candy or gum
Cassette tapes	

In contrast to natural reinforcers, material reinforcers are usually more effective for students who initially require **immediate reinforcement** in **smaller** amounts. Again, pair the reinforcer with a praise statement. Through pairing, the student gradually becomes motivated by praise alone.

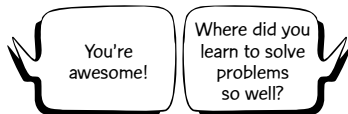
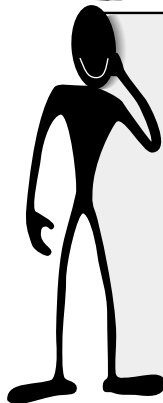
You can find more unique material reinforcers in costume shops, flea markets, magic or trick shops, and novelty stores.



### Generalized Reinforcers

- Raffle tickets
- Tokens
- Poker chips
- Points
- Credits

A generalized reinforcer is any item that can later be exchanged for something of value. This is an excellent method to help students delay gratification.

### Social Reinforcers

- A smile
- A wink
- A nice compliment
- Effective praise
- Proximity

Social reinforcers are very effective when used alone. However, they are often paired or used simultaneously when giving other reinforcers. Through pairing, a student gradually becomes motivated by social reinforcers alone as other forms of reinforcement are faded.

When giving praise, use the I-FEED-V rule. This means praise the student “immediately” after the target behavior occurs, “frequently,” and “enthusiastically”—especially when working on a new behavior. Also, be sure to use “eye contact” and specifically “describe the target behavior.” Finally, use a “variety of praise statements.”

When choosing reinforcers, always follow the golden rule: *Select reinforcement that doesn't cost a lot and doesn't take too much time to deliver.*

### Golden Rule

To keep your sanity  
and save a dime . . .  
choose inexpensive reinforcers  
that require little time.

## EFFECTIVE PRAISE

**I** mmediately  
**F** requently  
**E** nthusiastically  
**E** ye contact  
**D** escribe behavior  
**V** ariety

## Deliver positive reinforcement.

When teaching new skills or behaviors, make sure the student understands what behavior is required to earn the reward. Then, **each time** he performs the behavior, **immediately** reinforce him. Timing is everything. The **shorter** the delay between the behavior and reinforcer, the greater the chance the behavior will be strengthened or increased. In contrast, the **longer** the delay between the behavior and reinforcer, the greater the risk that another behavior will be inadvertently reinforced. Instructors use the following schedules to deliver reinforcement.

### Continuous Schedule of Reinforcement

Continuous reinforcement is time consuming but necessary when teaching a **new** skill. Be aware that satiation may occur when a student tires from continuous use of one reinforcer. To avoid this dilemma, use a **menu** of reinforcers. Once the student's behavior is well established, reduce the frequency of reinforcers by shifting from a continuous to an intermittent or unpredictable schedule. An intermittent schedule is designed to maintain and strengthen the behavior.

### Intermittent Schedule of Reinforcement

Once the behavior has been well established, it is important to introduce a systematic delay between the behavior and the reinforcer. Intermittent schedules maintain the newly learned behavior by keeping the student guessing when the next reinforcement will occur.

- ☞ For example, a supervisor intermittently reinforces Kristy every 2 to 3 minutes. Gradually, the supervisor moves to every 5 to 7 minutes and so on—until Kristy experiences a rate of reinforcement typical in her work environment.

Another kind of intermittent schedule reinforces the student after performing the target behavior an **average number of times**.

- ☞ For instance, Tiana has learned to complete her seat work problems. To increase her independence, the instructor moves from a continual to an intermittent schedule. At first, the instructor reinforces Tiana every time she completes an average of two to three problems. Then, on an average of every four to five problems and so on—until Tiana experiences a rate of reinforcement typical in her classroom.

These two examples of intermittent schedules help individuals delay gratification and maintain the appropriate behavior over a longer period of time. For additional information, see *Variations of the Technique*.

## Monitor student performance.

The only way to know if a reinforcer is working is to observe the student's behavior over time to determine if it is increasing. By collecting data on the student's performance, instructors can easily evaluate the value of the reinforcers and make adjustments as needed.

### Check Target Behaviors

If desired behaviors fail to increase, check the target behaviors. Are they well defined, and do students and staff understand them?

### Check Reinforcers

Also, check the reinforcers. Are there too many? Too few? Are they valued?

### Check Staff Consistency

Finally, check that all staff are administering reinforcement consistently. Is reinforcement occurring at a sufficient level to maintain the behavior? Perhaps adjustments need to be made.

## Examples

### Example 1

A history instructor was interested in increasing a junior high student's appropriate classroom behaviors (e.g., arriving to class on time, bringing necessary materials, beginning work on time). The instructor observed that the student

would always rush to the snack machine in the lunchroom. The instructor made use of the machine contingent upon the earning of a predetermined number of points for appropriate behavior.

**Example 2**

A young student was fascinated with invisible ink markers. During each instructional session that the student earned 8 out of 10 possible points, the student could use the markers for 3 minutes.

**Example 3**

Instead of providing a student with a star for every math answer written on the practice sheet,

the paraeducator delivered a star for approximately every third problem that was completed by the child. Sometimes a star was awarded after two answers and at other times only after four answers. The paraeducator also gave specific praise, such as, "Wow you're working fast!," "What a wizard!," or "You're too fast for me!," whenever a star was awarded. Providing reinforcement on a variable schedule kept the student on his toes as he was never quite sure when he would receive a star from the paraeducator.

## Variations of the Technique

### Schedules of reinforcement

See table on next page.

### Spinner

Try placing a menu of reinforcers on a spinner. The smaller wedges represent the more popular or expensive items, while the larger wedges are usually less costly and easier to provide. The spinner adds an element of chance that students love and is often motivation in itself.






### Grab bag

Each time a student meets a goal, such as completing a math assignment, the student gets to connect a dot on the chart. When a designated dot is reached, the student selects an item from the grab bag.

## Potential Problems and Solutions

### Behavior Does Not Increase

If the behavior failed to increase, there was not positive reinforcement. There are several strategies for selecting reinforcement. These include:

-  Watching the student to determine what she likes to do or what activities the student engages in during free time, leisure time, etc.
-  Asking the student what he would like to earn on a reinforcer checklist (a list of potential reinforcers).
-  Using a reinforcer menu containing pictures of potential reinforcers for students who have difficulty communicating their needs and wants.
-  Allowing students access to potential reinforcers by displaying items for a brief period each day.
-  Building a reinforcer menu that consists of items frequently selected by students.

## Schedules of Positive Reinforcement

Schedule	Description	Example	Advantage	Disadvantage
<b>Continuous</b>	<i>Every</i> response is reinforced.	Every time the student says "please" when making a request, the teacher smiles and praises the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New learning occurs quickly.</li> <li>• New behaviors can be shaped.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time consuming.</li> <li>• Student may become satiated.</li> <li>• When continuous reinforcement is stopped, the behavior may extinguish quickly.</li> </ul>
<b>Intermittent</b>	<i>Some</i> , but <i>not all</i> , of the appropriate responses are reinforced.	When the student says "please" when making a request, sometimes the teacher smiles and praises the student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains well-established behavior over time.</li> <li>• Behaviors are more resistant to extinction.</li> <li>• Student learns to delay gratification.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not effective for teaching new behaviors.</li> </ul>
<b>Ratio Schedule of Reinforcement</b>	Reinforcement is made contingent upon a <i>specific number</i> of correct or appropriate responses.	<p><b>Fixed Ratio</b> The student must make three requests using the word "please" before being reinforced.</p> <p><b>Variable Ratio</b> The student may be reinforced on the <i>average</i> of every three requests. Thus, he may be reinforced following four requests using the word "please" or following two appropriate requests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds a high response rate. The higher the ratio, the higher the rate.</li> <li>• Because of its unpredictable reinforcement schedule, the student's rate of responding remains essentially constant and resistant to extinction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An irregular burst of responding can occur if the reinforcement is stopped.</li> <li>• Not effective for teaching new behaviors.</li> </ul>
<b>Interval Schedule of Reinforcement</b>	Reinforcement occurs following a <i>specific amount of time</i> and the occurrence of one appropriate response.	<p><b>Fixed Interval</b> After 5 minutes has passed, the teacher reinforces the next request in which the student uses the word "please."</p> <p><b>Variable Interval</b> The student receives reinforcement on the average of every 5 minutes for using the word "please" when making a request. Sometimes the reinforcement occurs after 3 minutes or sometimes after 6 minutes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ease of implementation.</li> <li>• Ease of implementation. Because the time intervals are of different lengths, the student never knows which response will be reinforced. This unpredictability creates a steady pattern of responding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student stops performing following the reinforcement and begins to work again just prior to the next reinforcement period.</li> <li>• Not effective for teaching new behaviors.</li> </ul>



### Satiation

Satiation is when a student grows tired of the reinforcement, and the power of the reinforcer diminishes. An instructor may choose to do one or more of the following things to prevent or delay satiation:

- 👉 Shorten the instructional session in which the reinforcer is being used.
- 👉 Decrease the size or amount of the reinforcer.
- 👉 Switch to an alternative reinforcer.
- 👉 Have an array of reinforcers from which to choose.

### Student Does Not Maintain or Generalize the Behavior

Change the schedule of reinforcement. Gradually move from reinforcing each response to an intermittent schedule. Continue to generously use social reinforcement.

## Getting Ready

Obtain parental and administrative support for the reinforcement you intend to use.

### Materials and Supplies

- 👉 Some type of monitoring form or data sheet to record the number of appropriate behaviors the student is performing. Use this data to determine if the reinforcement is effective.
- 👉 A reinforcement checklist to assist instructors in determining effective **individualized** reinforcers for students.
- 👉 A supply of natural, material, sensory, and/or edible reinforcers that have been identified as reinforcing.
- 👉 A menu of reinforcers to provide variation and maintain student interest.



## References

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