

# From Positive Reinforcement to Positive Behaviors: An Everyday Guide for the Practitioner

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There are various opinions concerning the value of positive reinforcement when discussing modifying behaviors of young children. In some cases, individuals considered positive reinforcement difficult to implement and, in extreme cases, even felt it to be detrimental. Educators often use praise interchangeably with positive reinforcement when indeed an important distinction exists between the two. This paper discusses the differences between positive reinforcement and praise and demonstrates how to effectively apply positive reinforcement to help manage behavior of young children.

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**KEY WORDS:** reinforcement; praise; behavior; classroom management.

## INTRODUCTION

There are various opinions concerning the value of positive reinforcement when discussing modifying behaviors of young children. In some cases, individuals considered positive reinforcement difficult to implement and in extreme cases even felt it to be detrimental. In the latter situation, individuals such as Kohn (2001) perceive reinforcement as a means of manipulating children, stifling their intrinsic motivation and making them “praise junkies” (p. 25). He also implies that managing behavior is a form of negative control to please the adult and oppress the child.

There are definitely negative aspects of empty praise (Katz & Tello, 2003). Even young children are aware when admiration is false or canned. When a child struggles unsuccessfully to tie her shoes, and an adult states “You are doing such a good job” the child knows that the statement is unwarranted. It is encouragement, not praise, that should be utilized (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2004). In addition, children are

keenly aware when a candy coated “What a pretty picture” or “You are such a nice child” comes out with the same tonal quality for all the children in the class. However, individuals such as Kohn (2001) are ignoring some well-established premises that manage to accurately describe and predict human behavior. From this viewpoint, the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences can be discussed AND can be effectively applied to help manage behavior of young children.

## WHY USE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT?

It is essential, prior to any discussion concerning modification of behaviors, to differentiate between ‘praise’ and ‘positive reinforcement’. In the most classic definition, positive reinforcement is a method of identifying to children which behaviors are acceptable and appropriate and which are not. More specifically, the use of positive reinforcement is the act of identifying and encouraging a behavior, with the hopes that the desired behavior will increase (Burden, 2003). The theory is that any behavior followed by a pleasant stimulus is likely to be repeated (Westen 1999). This ‘pleasant stimulus’ can be anything ‘nice’ and can also include a multitude of other positive responses (Alberto & Troutman, 1990). Although praise is one of many forms of positive

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reinforcement, it is by no means the only or even the best choice when working with young children. Educators often use praise interchangeably with positive reinforcement when indeed an important distinction must be made between the two (Strain & Joseph, 2004). When a child engages in a behavior, whether random or intentional, a positive response from an adult serves as a signal to the child, indicating that the behavior exhibited is different from other behaviors.

This vignette concerning a child (age three and a half) who had a history of behavior problems in a childcare setting easily demonstrates this technique. The teacher asked the staff what activities the child liked to engage in at the center, and was told that the kitchen area was his favorite. With that information, the teacher asked the child if he would join her in the kitchen center, and they both sat at the child-sized table. The teacher then exclaimed "I am hungry and I do not know what to do! Can you make me something?" Slightly unsure, the child picked up a toy pot, threw a clump of plastic vegetables in it and handed it to the teacher. She pretended to eat in an exaggerated manner, making 'yummy' noises and causing the child to giggle. When she was 'finished' she exclaimed, "That was delicious! What else can you cook?"... and they were off; engaging in this simple, somewhat repetitive game, for almost 20 minutes. The key here is that the behaviors exhibited were all appropriate, reinforced, and devoid of the negative and inappropriate behaviors identified by the other teachers. Put another way, the purpose of positive reinforcement is to increase the frequency of desired behaviors by helping to identify and then validate them for the children.

This concept also applies to adults as well. Suppose you were asked to develop a new curriculum that took a month to prepare. Upon presenting it to your director she simply responds "I see you've done it." You are aware of that fact. What you want to know is it 'what she wants' and 'have I done it correctly?' To simply expect individuals to be happy with what they have done, be intrinsically reinforced by their own work, and to consider irrelevant what the boss thinks ignores the basic fact that the behavior may have nothing to do with personal desire. For example, maybe you did not want to develop the curriculum at all. You are only exhibiting a behavior that has been requested of you by, yes, a higher authority.

In a more specific situation, after handing in the curriculum what if your director states, "This is *not* what I want" The next most natural response is

"What *do* you want?" We are often in situations where the behavior we are asked to exhibit is unclear and what we really want is for the desired behavior to be clearly identified.

### ARE WE JUDGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR?

So do we reinforce children for behaviors that we deem appropriate? Of course we do. This is the way all societies teach their children about the mores of their culture and the behaviors required for success within that context (Strain & Joseph, 2004; Weber, 2002). Children look to adults, parents, and teachers for approval in order to confirm that the behaviors they are exhibiting are ones that are desired (Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000). By acknowledging the child's behavior as appropriate we teach the child which behaviors are preferred over others (Bukatko & Daehler, 2001).

When working with our own children, or in a classroom setting, there are many behaviors we must request of children that may have nothing to do with their desires. Even the most developmentally appropriate curriculum requires children to behave in an appropriate manner. For example, we need to let children know that even though they may feel like staying and playing, it may be time to go to lunch. We need to let them know that when they make the decision to stop playing and line up at the door, they have made the correct decision! We need to say, YES, that is what you need to be doing now (Snowman & Biehler, 2003). It is the adult who has set the rules, developed the schedule, and who is responsible for teaching the children appropriate behavior (Sy, DeMeis, & Scheinfeld, 2003). Kohn (2001) warns against passing on value judgments; however, all behaviors we require of children based on our societal principles are naturally value laden.

### WHY DO CHILDREN BEHAVE IN A CERTAIN WAY?

As primitive as it may seem, most small children behave in a rather random manner repeating behaviors that get a desired or positive reaction. Some children, by chance or intuition, behave in an appropriate manner and some do not. If their 'reinforcement' is attention at all costs, then whatever attention given, even if directed toward a negative behavior, will increase the likelihood that behavior will be repeated (Sternberg, 1998).

One example of this can be seen when a three-year-old child in a daycare setting was attempting to gain some attention from a specific teacher in the classroom. He put on a hat, walked over and stood in front of her. She ignored him. A few moments later he placed stickers all over his body, walked in front of her and again he was ignored. Finally, he picked up a block and threw it at her. Out came a stream of attention, albeit negative, but attention none the less.

On another occasion a mother was observed interacting with her son (approximately four years old) at a baseball game. He was jumping on the seats, hitting the people in front of him, and throwing popcorn. She was attending to him with a barrage of words and discussion about his behavior, the expected appropriate behavior and explanations about why he should be engaging in the behavior she was describing. For a moment, he sat down quietly. Her response was to abruptly turn her back to him and speak to the adult next to her. He looked at her, sitting quietly for several seconds, and then began to engage in the same behaviors as before, again gaining her attention. The mother, by behaving in this manner, unknowingly reinforced the opposite behavior she wanted.

### DO WE TEACH CHILDREN WHAT TO FEEL?

Young children are egocentric. Young children, especially under the age of four, have a very difficult time understanding how someone else feels (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002). Not that children are inherently selfish, it is simply that their cognitive development is not sophisticated enough to understand their own emotions, much less someone else's. They are unable to take the perspective of someone else and understand another's feelings (Leong & Bodrova, 2003). When a two year old bites someone who tries to take a toy away, the only clear idea he has in his mind at that time is 'mine!' When we ask a two year old, "How do you think that makes Billy feel when we bite him?" we are asking a developmentally inappropriate question. However, when we react with a quick, "NO Biting!" and proceed to comfort the bitten child, a process of social learning has begun. The child begins to learn that there are certain expectations about our behaviors and exhibiting inappropriate behaviors does not get us what we want (Ashiabi, 2000). As children get older they begin to learn what pleases others, but it is a gradual process that takes time (Swick, 2001). Children first need to understand the meaning of happy and sad for

themselves, before they can really attribute those feelings to others.

### HOW DOES POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT WORK?

It is actually very simple. Attend to appropriate behavior while attempting to ignore inappropriate behavior (Koch, 2003). It is amazing how our society indoctrinates individuals to do the exact opposite. A tendency exists to lavish attention on the misbehaving child, while ignoring the behavior of the child playing quietly. In fact, many people have been raised with the notion that if they attend to a well-behaved child, the child will suddenly start misbehaving. Although a child may attempt to test the boundaries of one's attention, positive attention does not *make* a child behave inappropriately. Inappropriate behavior is reinforced by adults' words, actions and attention.

An example of one occasion presents a rather embarrassing problem. A three-year-old boy was repeatedly saying a specific obscene word in the classroom. It was observed that each time he was not given exactly what he wanted; he proceeded to spout this colorful phrase to the horror of all the staff. The result: they instantly showered him with everything he wanted including hugs and appeals to not say that word. Wonderfully reinforced, just as the textbook would have it, the frequency of the behavior increased dramatically. On another occasion, the child was observed using his vocabulary while a teacher attempted to take away a toy that was being used as a weapon. After the first utterance of the obscene word the teacher sharply turned her back to him. After a short burst of obscene words, he slumped down on the ground in tears, realizing that this would not work to get the toy back. After a minute or two, the teacher returned to him, distracted him with a different toy and engaged in a pleasant game. The staff quickly modeled the lesson. After two weeks the behavior was practically extinguished, and after a month he never did it again.

### DOES POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT REALLY WORK?

There are four key elements to positive reinforcement that must be emphasized.

1. *Reinforcement* serves to increase a desired behavior, while the goal of *punishment* is to decrease an undesired behavior (Jackson & Panyan, 2002). It is important to acknowledge that adults have a keen understanding that an undesirable

behavior has an opposing desirable one. For example, we know the opposite of 'don't run around the room' is 'sit in your seat.' But to a child, this may not be two sides of the same coin. One second-grade boy explained his teacher's system of discipline. He stated that his teacher used little cut-out bears to represent each child. If children were to talk, get out of their seat, hit someone, etc., their bears would move along the board until they were in the 'no recess' location. When the child was asked, "What does your teacher want you to do?" the child was confused. He repeated all the things he was *not* to do. Again it was asked, "But what does your teacher *want* you to do... What would make her pleased?" Still confused he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe if I drew her a picture?" There are many things amiss with this discipline strategy (Jalongo, 2002; Levin & Nolan, 2004; Stanulis & Manning, 2002); however, delving into the negative aspects of punishment is not in the scope of this article. The point to be made is that the child, for all his efforts, could not identify the specific behavior that *was* desired, therefore decreasing the likelihood that he will be able to demonstrate it. It is absolutely essential to let the children know what behaviors we want, and when they have engaged in them (Henniger, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2004).

2. There is a phenomenon known as "extinction burst" (Ormrod, 1999). This is the rapid production of a behavior once the reinforcement is taken away. For example, one places money in a soda machine in hopes of being reinforced with a drink. After pressing the button for the desired refreshment, nothing happens. Usually, the first response is to hit the button several times, sometimes even violently. Pressing the button repeatedly is extinction burst. Often, when a teacher or a parent attempts to ignore an inappropriate behavior and the behavior becomes suddenly more intense, the adult often gives up or takes it as a sign of failure when, in fact, it is the exact opposite.
3. It is important to identify positive reinforcers that are easily and quickly attainable. Giving stickers or candy is not always feasible or desirable. That is why positive attention itself is sometimes the best choice. Although, a phrase like "I like how you are playing" is acceptable, often just sitting down and joining in the game, engaging in conversation or showing interest in what the child is doing will also serve as a positive reinforcement.
4. Ignoring unwanted behaviors is a key, but it is essential to stop dangerous or injurious behaviors immediately. That is, certainly stop a child from hitting another child, but refrain from a long lecture about behavior. Instead, indicate that the behavior is not what is desired and move on. Although some think we should identify the desired behavior and discuss it at this time, this is actually a misconception. When we say, "We don't hit our friends, if we hit our friends will get upset, we want our friends to be happy, we need to play nicely with our friends" we are giving attention to a behavior we do not want, and therefore inadvertently reinforcing the negative behavior. There is a subtle but important distinction between identifying a positive behavior when a child is engaging in it, and giving a child reinforcement for a behavior that does not warrant it. We have all seen a parent give candy to a child in the mall in order to 'stop' a temper tantrum. However, because of the close proximity of the negative behaviors (the tantrum) and the positive reinforcement (the candy), these

actions actually serve to ensure the likelihood that the behavior will continue.

One effective technique is to distract a child with a more appropriate behavior and then quickly reinforce it. For example, a child is climbing on the furniture. Say, "No climbing" then take the child's hand and direct her to another center, for example the block center, where you engage her in building or stacking, along with providing positive comments and attention. This distinction in the use of positive attention, although subtle, is essential. Calling across the room "Get down, we don't climb, we don't do that" neither stops the behavior nor, indicates the behavior desired.

## SUMMING IT ALL UP

It is true that when a child is engaged in a creative activity, like drawing or painting, if you indicate, "I like the color purple you are using," you will indeed get an entire page of purple. The important point is to understand *why* that would happen. It is not because the child sees little value in her own opinions or activities. It is not that the child is dependent on adult approval, and it is certainly not that she feels she is being judged. It is because what you have said *pleases her* and she wants to be part of your life and the activities that interest you. Yes, when a child is engaged in a creative activity, it is important to be aware that what is said can indeed alter the outcome. But when it comes to everyday, "play nicely with others" behaviors... PLEASE positively reinforce!

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