

# The Importance of Reinforcement in the Classroom

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## Abstract

*Reinforcement can be defined as a stimulus that follows depending upon a person's behavior, hence improving the probability of a particular behavior being repeated. Positive reinforcement can be conceptualized best as something nice being given for doing something nice. Positive behavior will occur more frequently if it is immediately followed by the presentation of a reinforcer. Positive reinforcement techniques, when done well and with the right balance, can be transformational for student behaviours and outcomes. The purpose of this article is to describe how reinforcement can be used more systematically in the classroom. I have located the research of this paper within a qualitative approach (Gay 1992; Babbie 1998; Leedy & Ormrod 2013). This decision was informed by the fact that this paper is not interested in the quantification of data. But its main interest lies in the painting of qualitatively rich picture of the phenomena being studied within the context of limited respondents (Hall 2007; Maserumule 2011; Baugh & Guion 2016). To this end, the problem of this study is explained descriptively and theoretically for the purpose of generating a crispy understanding of the importance of positive reinforcement in the education. In terms of data collection, the author sourced and reviewed literature on the topic. Among others, these sources included journal articles, books, magazines and newspapers. Keep in mind there is a difference between positive reinforcement and bribing. Bribing can lead to additional behavior struggles in the classroom. Positive reinforcement is earned, bribing is not. Reinforcers should be presented to the student immediately upon the demonstration of positive behavior, such as following classroom expectations. Bribing is typically presented to coax a student into engaging in a specific behaviour. The reinforcer is the stimulus you are presenting. Generally speaking, a reinforcer is typically an item or activity that the student enjoys. The study established that reinforcement increases the frequency of a behaviour while punishment decreases the frequency of a behavior. Once again, punishment decreases the occurrence of a behavior, but what you see as punishment may actually be reinforcement. The study therefore concludes that, it is critical that you never assume to know what is reinforcing your student's behaviors. Instead, take the time to conduct a brief preference assessment or a miniature observation to determine what your students like, such as preferred activities, toys, or people your students gravitate towards.*

**Keywords:** reinforce, punishment, negative reinforcement, positive reinforcement, bribe, classroom

## Background

Classroom management is essential for creating an environment that is conducive to learning. There is nothing worse than having a student's behavior throw a wrench in your entire lesson plan. It might be tempting to address disruptive behaviors directly with consequences and reprimands (Banks.2021). Whether you're a preschool, kindergarten, elementary, or middle school teacher, one thing is for certain: you need a classroom behavior management system that works. In order for any type of reinforcement to be effective, it needs to be implemented immediately after the behavior you are trying to change (Alberto

& Troutman, 2009) . When choosing a reinforcement system, you want to make sure it will be motivating to your students and that you can sustain it over time. You also need to be careful and pick something everyone can enjoy, and that will be well-received by your students' parents. There are so many ways you can incorporate positive reinforcement into a classroom setting, and you can make them as simple or elaborate as you see fit (Hagopian , Boelter & Jarmolowicz, 2011) . As long as the reinforcement is immediate, motivating, and attainable, it will serve as an effective tool in encouraging and guiding your students' behaviour. Data has proven time and again that reinforcement

is more effective than punishment at producing a sustainable change in behaviour (Berg, Wacker & Steege, 1995) . Additionally, it is no secret that punishment or excessive negativity can bog you down.If your goal is to increase the occurrence of hand raising and you scold the student every time he speaks out, but he continues to speak out anyway, have you punished or reinforced the speaking out behavior?If you ignore students who are raising a quiet hand and acknowledge those who are not, what is likely going to start happening with the students who were raising a quiet hand? (Williams, 2021).

Reinforcement can be both positive and negative. Positive reinforcement means presenting or providing a stimulus immediately following a behavior that increases the occurrence of that behavior in the future. This basic principle suggests that a behavior will occur more frequently if it is immediately followed by the presentation of a reinforce (Williams, 2021). One of teachers most valued behavior management tools is reinforcement. Reinforcement can be used to teach new skills, teach a replacement behavior for an interfering behavior, increase appropriate behaviors, or increase on-task behavior (AFIRM Team, 2015). Reinforcement may seem like a simple strategy that all teachers use, but it is often not used as effectively as it could be.

Reinforcement is only truly being used if following an appropriate behavior, a consequence (a reinforcer or removal of an aversive event) is provided and it increases the likelihood of the student using the behavior in the future (AFIRM Team, 2015). Reinforcement often fails to increase the desired behavior in the future when the reinforcer is not actually motivating to the student. We can prevent this by including the student in the process of identifying reinforcers through reinforcer surveys or reinforcement sampling. A reinforcer survey asks the student to answer questions and checklists to identify their reinforcers. Reinforcer surveys can be individualized to include the student's interests and classroom limitations (Larriba-Quest, 2021). For students who have limited communication skills,

reinforcement sampling may be a more appropriate strategy to identify their likes and dislikes (Berg, Wacker, & Steege, 1995). A teacher will first observe the student, and then talk to the student's parents, and other staff who work with the student to gather possible reinforcers. There are two types of reinforcers to choose from (Alberto & Troutman, 2009). Primary reinforcers are those that are innately reinforcing, such as edibles (small pieces of food or drink) or sensory experiences (light up toys, fans, massagers). Secondary reinforcers include tangible items, activities, special privileges, social praise, and attention. Once these items are gathered, the teacher will then present the reinforcers in pairs to the student and see which one they choose. The teacher should continue to present sets of two reinforcer choices until all choices have been paired with one another (Larriba-Quest, 2021).

Sometimes a teacher may begin using reinforcement, but over time they find it becoming less effective. In these cases, we need to think of deprivation and satiation (Larriba-Quest, 2021 citing AFIRM Team, 2015). Deprivation is keeping the reinforcer away from the student until they have exhibited the desired behavior. If the reinforcer is play dough, we make sure that the play dough is taken away from the free time area and the student isn't given play dough at home. This ensures that when they receive the play dough contingent on their appropriate behavior, it will be highly reinforcing. Satiation occurs when the reinforcer has been overused and is no longer motivating (Larriba-Quest, 2021). To avoid satiation, a variety of reinforcers should be used and new ones should be introduced. We may also want to teach the skill in several short periods. For example, a teacher who wants to teach the student how to follow a one-step direction may provide three opportunities to access the reinforcer and then wait an hour to do it again. Although edibles can be very rewarding, they should be avoided as it is easy for a student to satiate on food and are not always the most age-appropriate reinforcer. In cases where no other reinforcers could be identified for the

student, the edible should be broken up into small bites.

Some teachers may worry about using reinforcement due to the possibility of the student depending on the reinforcer to engage in the appropriate behavior or the need to provide high rates of reinforcement. This is a legitimate concern, but can be avoided by having a plan for how the reinforcement will be thinned. Reinforcement thinning is decreasing the overall rate or density of reinforcement provided to the individual when they emit the target behavior (Hagopian, Boelter, & Jarmolowicz, 2011). Three different ways to systematically decrease reinforcement are delay schedules, chained schedules, and multiple schedules. Delay schedules involve increasing the wait time between when the student produces the appropriate behavior and when they receive their reinforcer (Larriba-Quest, 2021). A teacher may provide a verbal response “wait” or provide a picture card that indicates wait after they emit the behavior. Chained schedules are usually used for behaviors that are maintained by escape. In these cases, the teacher will progressively increase the number of steps, amount of time, or the number of demands before the student can access the escape or reinforcement. Prior to the demands, the teacher should tell the student about the set criterion or provide a visual of the number of steps (Larriba-Quest, 2021). The last type of thinning is multiple schedules. With multiple schedules, the reinforcement component is decreased while the extinction component (time where no reinforcement is provided) is increased. This can be done by providing cue cards. For individuals who can read, they may be presented with cards that say “Reinforcement Available” or “Reinforcement Not Available” while others may be shown red or white cards. When shown the “Reinforcement Available” or white card, the student will receive reinforcement each time they produce the appropriate behavior and during the “Not Available” or red card, they do not receive reinforcement. The goal is to progressively increase the use of the red card while still maintaining appropriate behavior (Larriba-Quest,

2021). Remember, we aren’t rewarding good behaviour but expected behaviour, hard work and the extra mile of excellence. The goal of positive reinforcement is to give timely encouragement to somebody to make a behaviour happen again.

Although positive reinforcement, when used properly, can have a positive impact on students’ academic outcomes, negative reinforcement is more commonly used in the classroom, with relatively negative effects (Dobbs and Arnold, 2009). The constant use of negative comments makes students feel unworthy of praise (low self-perception) and have low intrinsic motivation. Having negative self-perception is especially worrying because scientific studies show us that self-perception has more influence on the success of students in the classroom than their actual skills (Hamre and Pianta, 2001). Before we describe when and how reinforcement should be used, it is important to describe the difference between two types of reinforcement, positive and negative. Positive reinforcement is the delivery of a reinforcer to increase appropriate behaviors whereas negative reinforcement is the removal of an aversive event or condition, which also increases appropriate behavior (AFIRM Team, 2015). An example of positive reinforcement is providing a sticker to a student once they’ve completed an assignment. An example of negative reinforcement is allowing the student to leave circle time for a five-minute break after they use a break card. As you can see, the goal of both positive and negative reinforcement is to increase desired behaviors.

As an example if the teacher praise the students for entering the class on time this one will have a positive effect on all the students which are sitting in the class and witnessing this behavior. Also means to adding of repetitive stimulus to increase a certain behavior or response

### **Theories of positive reinforcement**

Skinner’s model of operant conditioning is based on the assumption that studying a behavior’s cause and its consequences is the best way to understand and regulate it. This theory grew from

Thorndike's "law of effect" which stated that a behavior that is followed by pleasant or desirable consequences is likely to be repeated, while behavior that is followed by undesirable consequences is less likely to be repeated (McLeod, 2018). B. F. Skinner in his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* said that thinkers should make fundamental changes in human behavior, and they couldn't bring these changes only with the help of physics or biology. He believes that we only acquire the technology of behavior. Centuries ago people were seeing themselves as a person who could feel himself better any other creatures in the world. But in today's world he is not able to understand himself. Although science have emerged vastly; but we are not able to compare anything like a science of human behavior with any other science in the world. (Amutan, 2014).

Reinforcement theory describes specifically how people learn behavior and learn how to act. Also different instructors who attempt to bring motivation for the students should make sure that these teachers will not give reward to all students at the same time. They should say to the students who are not acting well in the course of learning and they are not leading a correct way in this process. Teachers basically should bring awareness to the students and teach them in what they are able to gain positive reinforcement. Reinforcement, "is a term in operant conditioning and Behavior analysis for process of increasing the rate or probability of a behavior in the form of response by delivery either immediately or shortly after performing the behavior". Reinforcement theory of motivation highlights the state of mind of each person, that is; his emotion and feeling. Reinforcement theory concentrates generally on changes which occur in each person when he or she goes through in the course of some actions or acting some behavior. So, based on Skinner: "the external environment of the organization must be designed effectively and positively so as to motivate the employee". Reinforcement theory of Motivation is a powerful way to control the process of action and behavior in each person. This theory doesn't look at the reason for people's behavior. Is the

short reinforcement theory of motivation looks at the state of mind of each person.

Reinforcement theory of motivation overlooks the internal state of individual, i.e., the inner feelings and drives of individuals are ignored by Skinner. This theory focuses totally on what happens to an individual when he takes some action. Thus, according to Skinner, the external environment of the organization must be designed effectively and positively so as to motivate the employee. This theory is a strong tool for analyzing controlling mechanism for individual's behaviour. However, it does not focus on the causes of individual's behaviour.

### **What is the Meaning of Positive Reinforcement?**

Positive reinforcement as a construct derived from operant conditioning was developed by American psychologist B. F. Skinner. While studying rats, Skinner found that if they were consistently given a reward for pressing a bar that administered food, the rats would press the bar more in order to get the reward. Similarly, if people find a particular behavior is being rewarded, people will at least subconsciously repeat that behavior more often than not ((Hagopian , Boelter & Jarmolowicz, 2011). Positive reinforcement refers to the introduction of a desirable or pleasant stimulus after a behavior. The desirable stimulus reinforces the behavior, making it more likely that the behavior will reoccur.

Positive reinforcement is the act of rewarding good behaviour, rather than punishing a poor choice. It's been found to be beneficial for people of all ages, but it's particularly powerful for school-aged children in the classroom setting. At OWIS, positive reinforcement is used at all levels and allows teachers to highlight the right choices that students are making rather than embarrassing them for making mistakes (Alberto & Troutman, 2009) . According to the community of practitioners at Positive Psychology, the concept of positive reinforcement was developed by researchers who tested their theories on animals, who responded in kind to various positive reinforcement exercises. It was quickly noted that positive reinforcement

could be used as a classroom tool to promote consistent positive behaviours among students (Grigoropoulos, 2022). It's a positive parenting method used for a variety of purposes and in a wide range of contexts, as it capitalizes on the good behaviors that are already being displayed, rewarding the natural tendencies towards good behavior in the individual you are working to train (Ackerman, 2022). Like other positive parenting methods, positive reinforcement is a popular method of encouraging certain behaviors. One of the reasons it is so popular is its effect on learning—not only is it an effective way to teach, it is a lasting method of teaching. A study on the use of positive reinforcement in the classroom showed that it can be used to significantly improve students' age-appropriate behaviors and social skills (like manners), and the effects will last even after the reward system is removed or discontinued (Diedrich, 2010). In other words, the lessons learned through positive reinforcement in the classroom tend to stick around (Ackerman, 2022)

Positive reinforcement is a new way of looking at operant conditioning, created as an alternative to corporal punishment. In the old archaic ways of learning, harming a student emotionally or physically was seen by teachers as a means of making students learn. Fear was their way of controlling and modifying the outcome of a student or a group of students. Even though it was not used by every teacher at the time, it was not seen as a bad thing if a teacher caned or humiliated a child; in fact, it used to be encouraged by some parents because they thought that they were helping the students. However, today it is a proven fact that this is very far from the truth. In fact, today corporal punishment is seen as a crime in almost every country in the world and is almost universally accepted as a form of abuse (Alberto & Troutman, 2009). Students who have undergone physical and psychological abuse directly or indirectly from their teachers are more prone to emotional trauma, depression, delinquency, social isolation, trust issues, etc. However, this does not mean that students can do whatever they want and not get punished for it. Since the consequences of the

teacher's actions will be very significant, it is important to make the consequences of doing something good more enticing than the possibility of harm if they are doing something wrong. This is where positive reinforcement comes into play.

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### **How does positive reinforcement motivate students?**

When applied promptly after the target action and consistently amongst all students, positive reinforcement can be very effective at changing behaviours in the classroom. Students who feel like they will be acknowledged and rewarded for good behaviour are more likely to adopt those behaviours than those who do not feel it is worth

their while (AFIRM Team, 2015). Teachers who are appropriately trained in positive reinforcement techniques can select the types of positive reinforcement that will work best within their classroom setting, depending on the age and development level of their students.

Large class sizes make classroom management every teacher's most important task. For busy parents under pressure, it can also be difficult to manage time effectively. The stress can often lead to frustration and result in a negative verbal relationship with children (Alberto & Troutman, 2009). In order to get the situation under control, parents and teachers resort to threats, yelling and demeaning comments that constitute negative reinforcement. These methods can be effective in gaining control, but they have a very detrimental effect on children. Negative reinforcement never nurtures the kind of behaviour you are looking for. It's a Band Aid solution that alienates children, making them more difficult to control in the future.

Positive reinforcement rewards children who behave in a way that you expect them to. Positive reinforcement also rewards children for accomplishments or new skills that they have acquired. Positive reinforcement can take many forms and its best to find one that suits your class or child best (Berg, Wacker & Steege, 1995). It can take the form of praise, extra time for relaxation or bonus activities as well as prestige e.g. electing a student of the week. Younger students like special attention from an adult as a reward while older students tend to prefer greater access to activities (Alberto & Troutman, 2009). Ask your students what they would like as a reward and, if they perform all of their classroom activities well, they can enjoy chatting with friends or less homework.

In classroom situations, the teacher elects to reinforce at an individual or group level. Individual reinforcements reward students who excel and may encourage others to follow suite. Group rewards are offered when all students in the class complete the prescribed work and behave well. This method has the added advantage of harnessing peer

pressure which older students are particularly influenced by.

When considering positive reinforcement in teaching and education, the purpose of it was not to act as a deterrent or a replacement for punishment, but rather as a means of providing an incentive for students to repeat the behaviors that are desired (Alberto & Troutman, 2009). Simply put, by providing students with an outcome that is purely positive when they accomplish something good or when they behave in a certain desired way, students are encouraged to repeat that again. It is a universal principle that occurs naturally in each and every classroom, so there is no need for adopting a foreign methodology that everyone in the classroom is expected to learn. In addition to offering the opportunity to improve the rate of appropriate behaviors, planning positive reinforcement also means that educators can avoid haphazardly promoting inappropriate behaviors by mistake (Hagopian, Boelter & Jarmolowicz, 2011). It can be very difficult to avoid reinforcing misbehavior just by paying attention to it.

Positive reinforcement is considered one of the most effective strategies at producing measurable and sustainable behavior change. One reason positive reinforcement is so efficient and effective is that it can be incorporated into all classroom activities including instruction, other classroom management systems, transitions, and more. Using positive reinforcement in the classroom gives teachers and other school personnel the opportunity to catch students being good. It is important for students to feel safe, supported, and successful at school. Positive reinforcement is one strategy practitioners can use to ensure appropriate student behavior is being acknowledged and rewarded (Williams, 2021).

If the behavior you are seeking is quiet hand raising, it is important to reinforce quiet hand-raising. By praising students with a quiet raised hand, giving out points, or passing out a small edible, you are strengthening the hand-raising behavior. Additionally, you are demonstrating the types of positive behaviors that you will

acknowledge in the classroom. This rewards the students who are participating appropriately and models positive behaviors for those that are not (Williams, 2021).

After a student has demonstrated a positive behaviour we acknowledge it and reinforce it because this increases the likelihood that the behaviour will be repeated. Our positive reinforcement techniques motivate students to do what they are capable of doing and when given frequently and consistently, they can have considerable impact. I would argue that positive reinforcement is often transformational and can have long-standing effects.

#### **Positive reinforcement can:**

- Encourage repetition of good deeds committed by the student.
- Make students aware of where their strengths lie – and help them to capitalise on them.
- Help students to understand the dos and don'ts much more effectively than if listening to a teacher "lecture" them (Alberto & Troutman, 2009).

#### **Is it Possible to Change Behaviour Without Punishment?**

Yes, it is possible to change behaviour in students without punishing them. Positive reinforcement can be used in many ways to help students develop good habits and avoid making poor choices. However, it is essential to recognise the important role that timing plays in the overall success of positive reinforcement. According to Verywell Mind, research has shown that the sooner a behaviour is rewarded, the more likely it is that the operant conditioning will work. The more time that lags between the positive behaviour and the positive reward, increases the likelihood of rewarding an intervening behaviour inadvertently (Grigoropoulos, 2022).

#### **How to Use Positive Reinforcement in the Classroom**

Both positive and negative reinforcement are effective ways of strengthening desirable behavior in children when used correctly. Negative reinforcement tends to be effective in the short-term, however research tends to suggest that positive reinforcement is a better long-term strategy for younger children.

If you want to know how to use positive reinforcement in the classroom, here are 6 things to consider (Amutan, 2014:76):

##### 1. Be clear and consistent

If you want to know how to use positive reinforcement in the classroom, one of the first things you want to do is set clear guidelines for your students, and commit to following through with them.

1. Take the time to review your expectations with your students when needed, and remember that the key to good behavior is consistency.

##### 2. Make sure the reinforcement is immediate

In order for any type of reinforcement to be effective, it needs to be implemented immediately after the behavior you are trying to change. So, in the case of positive reinforcement, the reward must be provided as soon as the desirable behavior occurs.

##### 3. Never take rewards away!

If a sticker, prize, token, or coupon is earned, it is something to be proud of. Do not punish a student by discounting something he/she worked hard to achieve in the past due to his/her poor behavior in the present.

##### 4. Choose something that's motivating

When choosing a reinforcement system, you want to make sure it will be motivating to your students and that you can sustain it over time. You also need to be careful and pick something everyone can enjoy, and that will be well-received by your students' parents. Sweets and desserts are an example of a reinforcement not all children can

enjoy due to food sensitivities and allergies, diabetes, and parental rules around sugar intake.

#### 5. Make sure it's attainable

Another important but sometimes overlooked tip for those who want to know how to use positive reinforcement in the classroom is to ensure every child can legitimately meet your expectations. For example, if you thinking of creating a class reward system whereby every student has to read 4 books within a month to earn a class pizza party, ask yourself how realistic this is. If you have a couple of struggling readers in your class, 4 books might be too big a stretch for them. While you want to motivate and challenge your class, these students may feel anxious and discouraged due to fear of failure, and their peers may place undue pressure on them and retaliate if the reward isn't earned.

#### 6. Find ways to positively reinforce every child

My final tip for those who want to know how to use positive reinforcement in the classroom is to make sure you reward everyone. While there will be certain children in your classroom who routinely exhibit the behaviors you are trying to reinforce, and others who seem to go out of their way to push your buttons, it's important that you find a way to positively reinforce the behavior of each child over time in order for your reinforcement system to be successful. If the same students receive praise and/or rewards over and over again, the others will eventually feel there is no point trying. Keep in mind that the children who act out the most are typically the ones who need the most love, so dig deep and find a way to call attention to the things they do right every now and then.

### Conclusion

Positive reinforcement can be called the future of the classroom dynamic. Children, teachers, and parents need to work together to create a conducive learning environment for the students so that they can grow up to be responsible citizens who are not only well informed but also knowledgeable about

how to carry themselves as well how to treat others with respect and dignity. Contrary to popular belief, positive reinforcement does not need to be complicated. Taking the time to verbally acknowledge what a child did correctly through positive language can go a long way in motivating him/her to repeat the behavior again

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