

Positive reinforcement

“Motivation only enables us to do what we are already capable of doing.”

– Robert Sylwester, Emeritus Professor of Education,
University of Oregon

To make positive changes, students need a clear idea of what positive behaviour is and to be positively reinforced when they demonstrate that behaviour. Positive reinforcement is any event that follows a behaviour and increases the likelihood that the behaviour will be repeated. Positive reinforcement motivates students to do what they are capable of doing.

Intensify reinforcement

Vary reinforcement

To maintain motivation and interest, vary the types of positive reinforcements that students receive. With input from students, identify positive reinforcements such as:

- praise and nonverbal communication (e.g., smile, nod, thumbs up)
- social attention (e.g., a conversation, special time with the teacher or a peer)
- tangibles such as stickers, new pencils or washable tattoos
- activities or privileges such as playing a game, sitting in a special place in the class, drawing, writing, colouring, going to recess or gym early, having extra computer time
- secondary positive reinforcements (such as checkmarks, tokens or money) for students to accumulate in order to acquire tangibles or be allowed to participate in special activities.

Give these reinforcements frequently and consistently.

Some positive reinforcements are more valuable to students than others. Have students rate a list of reinforcers on a five-point scale to determine which ones they value most.

Time the delivery

Predetermine how frequently the positive reinforcement will be delivered. In the initial stages, students learn the behaviour–reinforcement relationship most effectively when the reinforcement is delivered consistently every time the behaviour occurs.

Strive to deliver the reinforcement immediately after the behaviour occurs. If this is not physically possible, then immediately let the student know that he or she has displayed the desired behaviour and positive reinforcement will be forthcoming. Deliver the reinforcement with enthusiasm.

Be sensitive to individual needs

Be sensitive about when and how the reinforcement is delivered. Classrooms and groups of students have their own culture. Grade 3 students may relish receiving praise that all of the other students can hear; Grade 7 students may prefer to receive positive feedback quietly; for example, a sign, gesture or note. They may even feel that verbal praise the rest of the class can hear is a negative consequence.

To sustain the behaviour without having to deliver reinforcement every time, use a fixed ratio of delivering reinforcements to establish the new behaviour and then a variable ratio to encourage durability of the behaviour.

- **Fixed ratio:** deliver the reinforcement every second, third or fourth time the desired behaviour occurs.
- **Variable ratio** (sometimes referred to as **intermittent scheduling**): deliver the reinforcement on an average of every fourth time the desired behaviour occurs (sometimes after the third time, sometimes after the fifth).

Help students learn to accept positive reinforcement

Some students may desire positive reinforcement but not know how to react when they receive it. Some students reject praise because they have a low opinion of themselves, possibly because of a history of failure or abuse.

Some students have a history of receiving “sandwiched praise,” that is, praise is given, but in between mostly negative feedback. For example, an adult might say, “That is great printing, but why couldn’t you do that earlier when I first asked you?” If this occurs frequently, positive reinforcement becomes an indicator for the student that something negative is going to happen.

“Drop praise” is effective in these situations. When students are demonstrating positive behaviour, walk by and quickly “drop” the praise, walking away before they have a chance to deny or argue against it. If students do try to deny it, either ignore the remarks or simply say, “That’s the way that I see it.”

Verbal praise

Verbal reinforcement is one of the most effective types of positive reinforcement that school staff can use.

Describe the positive behaviour while giving praise.

The comments should focus on what the student did right and be stated in positive language. For example, “That was a wonderful paragraph you wrote because ...”

Give praise immediately.

The sooner the positive reinforcement is given in relation to a behaviour, the more likely the student will continue or repeat that behaviour.

Vary the statements given as praise.

When students hear the same praise statement repeated over and over, it may lose its value.

Provide information to students about their competence or the value of their accomplishments.

For example, “That was a wonderful paragraph you wrote because ...” or “That was a kind thing to do when you helped Ms. Fisher carry those bags. I know it made her feel more welcome in our school.”

Attribute success to effort and ability.

This implies that similar successes can be expected in the future. For example, “Your studying really paid off. That’s a good mark on your math test. It shows you really nailed problem solving.” This kind of praise also helps students gain a better appreciation of their own skills.

Start where the students are

Ensure there are plenty of opportunities for students to earn positive reinforcement. Behaviour modification programming often fails because of insufficient positive reinforcement for positive behaviours. If a student is not receiving positive reinforcement or is receiving it very infrequently, the programming is at fault. Students need to receive repeated positive reinforcement as motivation for demonstrating appropriate behaviour.

Maintain a 4:1 ratio

Give positive reinforcement at least four times for every one negative or corrective interaction. Success in this regard depends substantially on the initial observation and data collection. For example, if students physically strike out twice a day on average, aim to give them positive reinforcement for the replacement behaviour (e.g., keeping hands to themselves or not striking out) eight times per day. This might mean giving positive reinforcement every hour that they do not strike out.

Create opportunities for success

If a student can currently only stay on task for two minutes, start by giving him or her positive reinforcement after two minutes. Then ask the student to progressively increase the amount of time on task, and give positive reinforcement accordingly. If the focus is on the student listening to the teacher and cooperating, the teacher aims to make requests that the student is likely to complete.

Token economies¹²

Token economies can be an integral part of creating a positive learning environment. They can increase the frequency of positive behaviours by awarding individual students with a “token” contingent on following rules or performing specific behaviours. Tokens may be coins, points on a card, checkmarks, stickers or paper awards having an assigned value. These tokens are then exchanged at a later time for something of value to that student. Tokens may be “cashed-in” for “back-up” reinforcers such as food, objects, activities or special privileges.

Token economies can:

- lead to increased consistency of reinforcement and attention to positive behaviours
- increase motivation
- offer portability and availability across settings
- offer immediate, positive feedback and prompts without disruption to instruction task
- change or increase performance criteria as students grow more capable
- be used to teach delayed gratification
- be generalized to other settings, and support home programs and parent involvement
- be paired with social recognition and praise to teach the value of natural outcomes and the language of praise
- enhance rule following
- promote imitation of appropriate behaviour by observing reinforcement received by peers
- teach the language of self-evaluation and self-reinforcement.

12. Adapted with permission from Karen Bain (July 2007).

To be effective, token economies must be planned carefully. Establishing a token economy involves:

- assessing students to find out if they have the ability and skills necessary to demonstrate the specific behaviours that will earn tokens
- selecting and defining specific social or academic behaviours, skills or performance levels which require increased positive reinforcement
- selecting tokens that are easy to use and match student interests
- selecting a variety of reinforcers that reflect students' interests and preferences
- establishing a set of rules for how the tokens are provided, and for when and how tokens can be spent
- specifying how the system will be introduced and taught to students
- deciding how tokens will be managed
- training staff on:
 - how and when to reinforce and how much reinforcement to give
 - use of descriptive praise to pair with tokens, "Sitting quietly – 2 points!"
- deciding how data on the target behaviours will be collected and monitored over time
- planning how the behaviours will be generalized to other settings, or with other people
- specifying how the program will be faded out or new behaviours for change will be selected.

The Rainbow Friend's Club, a social relationship-based token economy

Although many token economies are set up for individual students, group token economies can be useful for teaching rules, developing social skills and defining social expectations in classrooms. The following example, The Rainbow Friend's Club, is an example of a classroom-based token economy designed to build social skills and enhance cooperative group work in an elementary setting.

The Rainbow Store, a display on a classroom wall, held a wide variety of food, small toys and art supplies, and cards with activities such as "10 minutes free time," or "make a cup of hot chocolate." Each item had a price tag of a certain number of points.

All students in the class had a membership card and they each selected an item from the store to work for. The students put their cards on the item they had selected and recorded their checkmarks on a score card containing a number of blanks equal to the price of their chosen item.

Checkmarks were given for specific, appropriate behaviours and this was paired with verbal praise clearly describing why the student was receiving a checkmark, “Good looking at Jeff when he talks.” This descriptive feedback was particularly important at the beginning of the program as students learned the language necessary for evaluating and reinforcing their own behaviour. Checkmarks were also given to the whole group to help develop social relationships. “Everyone helped clean up, so the whole club gets a checkmark.” “Wow, everyone worked together to be on time for math!”

Unless direct group instruction was taking place, as soon as the last checkmark was earned, a student could get the selected item from the store. If the last checkmark happened during the middle of an instructional task, the student waited until the first natural break to get the item—usually not more than 10 or 15 minutes. The student then selected a new item to work toward.

The class was encouraged to recognize individual students when they “got to the store” as a form of additional social praise. A meeting of The Rainbow Friend’s Club was scheduled for each Friday afternoon for the last few minutes of the day. New items were displayed in the store, specific social skills were reviewed, and students who had met specific goals were recognized.

Parents were introduced to the club and the token economy, and they often contributed items to the store. As much as possible, students were involved in maintaining the store, taking care of check sheets and recording.

Students were taught to self-reinforce when a random interval buzzer was set during some work periods and at the sound of the buzzer, students would decide if they were “on task” and if so, could give themselves a checkmark. This approach promoted personal responsibility and reflection. On occasion, students were also prompted to give other students checkmarks. “Look around and give a checkmark to someone who is staying in his or her work area and working with his or her math blocks.” This technique was instrumental in building group relationships and using the positive behaviour of others as a visual model.